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LOVING AND SERVING.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "SYLVAN HOLT'S DAUGHTER," "STRAIGHTFORWARD,"

"A POOR SQUIRE," ETC. ETC.

Harriet Parr

"A quicke and soft touch of many strings, all shutting up in one
musicall close."

SIR THOMAS OVERBURY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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LOVING AND SERVING.

CHAPTER I.

“WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

“O mirth and innocence ! O milk and water !
I love you both, and both shall have my praise.”

BYRON.

A SUMMER morning-room full of girls, three sisters and their cousin. The sisters are Elizabeth, Jane, and Ann Sheffield ; their cousin is Mary Martha Brooke.

“What’s in a name ?” says Elizabeth.
“M. M., yours stands for loving and serving —if you offered to cover these school library books I should take it very kindly.”

“I’ll cover them, and welcome ! I was looking out for something to do,” M. M. cries eagerly, and draws near to the round

table where the book-parcel has just been opened.

“That’s a dear! I hate the smell of new books,” says Elizabeth. “There, take them away. Carry them off to the window-seat at the other end of the room.”

Mary Martha takes her hands full and goes; there is half a year’s supply, and she makes several journeys between the table and the window-seat. “Now these are my business—don’t let anybody else meddle with them,” says she, and stands, feeling after what next.

“Thimble, needle and thread,” says Jane, who is watching her.

“Oh yes! Thimble, needle and thread!” M. M. echoes.

“And the big scissors—here they are,” Jane adds, and holds them out.

The little cousin takes the big scissors, and poises them airily; there is still something wanting to begin her business.

“It is the black holland. You will have to

go to nurse for that,” Jane says again, and M. M. runs out, leaving the door open.

“Your wits are wool-gathering, M. M.,” says Ann, as she comes in again.

“Wool-gathering? Oh no, nothing of the sort—they are all here;” but M. M. punctuates her contradiction with a long breath.

The girls are now every one busy with their fingers. Elizabeth has taken up a filmy cambric handkerchief on which she is embroidering her monogram; it smells sweet from lying in company with a sachet of russia leather chips in her work-basket. Jane is knitting baby socks for a coming bazaar, which allows her eyes to wander, and Ann is etching designs of insect life on menu-cards for the next dinner-party. The sisters are sisterly and much alike, nice girls, not remarkable in any way, or wanting to get themselves talked about. Their cousin has a pleasing face but wistful, as if apprehensive of something about to overtake her that she would like to run

away from. And this is so. She has lately been given to understand that she ought to have a judgment in her own affairs, that she ought, perhaps, even to assume a charge of herself—a state of life to which she does not feel that Nature has shaped her. It is almost pathetic, her effort to be useful to her cousins, that she may stay where she is, but they have all said, and their mother has said, that, dear as she is, they could dispense with her. Mr. Sheffield is for putting off the evil day to the very latest moment—he has even forbidden it to be mentioned in his hearing. But what is forbidden to be mentioned in open council is often the more discussed in the privy chamber, and during the past month Mary Martha's fate and fortunes have been a constant theme of debate within closed doors. Since yesterday, however, a circumstance not yet revealed to her has put a new light and colour into them.

The sisters were well-grown young women ; their cousin was of the order of lean kine yet, four years younger than the youngest of them

and only six months out of school. She had no other home than this, to which she had come from India, in the care of her mother’s maid, a soldier’s widow whose husband had fallen in the same field as Mary Martha’s father. Her mother had died of cholera on the journey down to Bombay, and there was an end of poor little M. M.’s baby delights. She was a lively little monkey, an animated brown toy for the sisters, who used her as such when they were playfully disposed, and sent her to the nursery when she became troublesome. They were really very good to her, and taught her lessons amongst themselves until she was of an age to be received into the School for Orphan Daughters of Officers. Mr. Sheffield would have preferred keeping her to be governessed with his own girls ; but here he was overruled, and Mary Martha gained, perhaps, more than she lost by it. There was coming back for the holidays, when she had the effect of a bit of novelty, a bird out of a cage, something

to treat and make much of. She grew up slowly, and was a long while in bud. From very childhood a sweet gravity was her everyday face, but it masked a deal of fun. She was a capital little actress, a born mimic, and had withal such a sincerity and warmth of disposition that it was impossible not to like her—not to be in love with her more or less continually. With so much character a will of her own might be expected, and perhaps a temper. She frowned indeed sometimes till people hardly knew her, and said M. M. looked awful—*awful!* In M. M.'s private mind there was always reason enough for the lowering aspect of her face. It was mostly fair weather there, it was often sunshine of the sunniest, but clouds and vapours came forth from her eyes, and overspread her whole countenance when there was storm or terror in her soft bosom. And naturally so. The three sisters were good bread, but Mary Martha was wine and spice, sweetness and light, and whatever else goes

to the composing of the indefinable quality of genius. Such, that is to say, was the flattering opinion formed of her by a sage who was supposed to comprehend all mysteries.

Meanwhile she is covering those school library books. She has undone the cover of an old one to find out exactly how it ought to be done.

"I should never have thought of that," says Elizabeth. "But somebody has defined genius as an infinite capacity for taking pains."

The little cousin is absorbed in her task and pressing on with it. "I hope the black will not come off on my fingers," she says to herself, and inspects the tips of her pretty digits that are most in contact with the holland.

"What if it does? It will wash off," says Jane, whose knitting is the whitest and softest wool.

"Perhaps so—but I object to the appearance of shaking hands with the sweep."

"That is your old-fashioned prejudice.

Everybody shakes hands with the sweep nowadays."

A space of silence ensues, which is broken by Ann. "Children, who's for a walk? This busy bee has improved the shining hour long enough indoors," she says, and stands up straightening her back, while her eyes pace complacently along the ranks of menu-cards that she has finished. Mary Martha lays down her business, and comes over to review them.

She indicates impressively a musing daddy-longlegs, and says: I call that personal—*personal!* You *know* you meant it."

"You see double, M. M.," Ann retorts, but convicts herself with a titter.

Jane approaches and inquires, "Who is to be ladybird? Kitty Clewer?" There is application in that design too.

"They are mischievous little creatures in a garden, *most* mischievous little creatures in a garden," M. M. informs everybody—people have called *her* "ladybird," and she

likes the name, but not the nature of the devastating pretty insect ; so Kitty Clewer may have the card for her.

Elizabeth draws near. "That caterpillar stirs—that earwig will start off running directly! I don't admire your entomological specimens on a dinner-table, Nancy," says she, and walks away shuddering.

"You are too fastidious, Betsy. There are no entomological specimens here but such as might crawl out of the salad, or hop out of the dessert, or fly in at the window."

"That's consolation! And Mrs. Bloxham will bring the beetles on her cap."

Elizabeth has folded her handkerchief, Jane has put by the baby sock in her knitting basket, and Ann has gathered her etching tools into their drawer. The three sisters are all for a walk, but Mary Martha returns to her business. At the door Elizabeth, going out the last, pauses, and looks back at her thoughtfully, even tenderly.

"Won't you come, M. M.?" she says,

not meaning it, for this walk is a matter of arrangement with their mother, to give her a certain opportunity.

"I think I'll stay in, dear. There's after luncheon," M. M. answers, with an air of considering; and then she is alone, not sorry to be a little while alone.

The room is pleasant, and perfumed with flowers. Mary Martha does not mind the other smell of new books. She has no troublesome thoughts in her mind at this moment; perhaps none at all, busy or idle; she just goes on with her business until presently enters to her Mrs. Sheffield, wanting to know if Nancy has finished those menu-cards.

"Because I have five minutes to spare, and might put the names to them if she has, and then they would be done," says she.

The little cousin forbears articulate reply—that would spoil sport, for mother to put the names to them.

"Where does Nancy keep them, dear? I

don’t see them,” Mrs. Sheffield says again, performing a slow tour of the table-drawers.

“If they are not there, I don’t know where they are,” M. M. answers boldly, for that is the truth as far as it goes.

“Oh, here they are—no, these are blank cards. Nancy has put them in a safe place of her own. They take her a long while to do.”

“Yes and people carry them off—such a shame,” M. M. remarks, but only to effect a diversion, for they are supposed to be carried off as worth keeping.

Mrs. Sheffield does not desist from her search until her spare five minutes must be more than exhausted, and even then she does not go. She comes towards Mary Martha and sits down in a casual, comfortable way, as if she had meant it all along, and the menu-cards were only a feint to cover her approach. M. M. thinks so, and there is a flutter within that sets all the signals of her face flying.

"Don't look so pale, love. Why knit your brow so hard?" Mrs. Sheffield remonstrates.

"I know what you are going to say—and that it is for my good——"

"Are you *sure* that you know what I am going to say?" Mrs. Sheffield inquires with a peculiar significance.

Mary Martha looks up confusingly. The elder lady colours, and feels, perhaps, ashamed of her errand.

"It is a proposal of another sort. Cannot you guess?"

M. M. does not open her lips; she looks attentive, distressingly attentive.

"Cannot you guess?" Mrs. Sheffield repeats with unmistakable significance.

"I have not the remotest idea," says M. M., asserting it so flatly that it is plain she is telling a story, and her aunt contradicts her.

"You know perfectly!"

"Oh, if I know *perfectly*, it is not necessary

to tell me, and I may go on with my business."

Mary Martha's tone is so airy that there is no disrespect in it, and Mrs. Sheffield, who is akin to her in spirit no less than in blood, takes her as she means. A vigilant silence prevails between them for the space of a minute, and then the task imposed upon Mrs. Sheffield is brought to a summary conclusion.

"It is Mr. Ockleston. And now I will leave you to think about it," says she, and rises to go.

"I *detest* him," says M. M., and pulls her thread with a twitch that breaks it.

CHAPTER II.

"ONE'S CONTEMPORARY, YOU KNOW."

"Love should run out to meet love with open arms."

R. L. STEVENSON.

THE proposal of marriage that Mr. Ockleston had made for Miss Brooke was addressed in proper form to Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield, and had created the lively interest of a welcome and wholly unexpected event in the house. It was communicated to the daughters the night before it was introduced to the young lady who was the object of it. The sisters were amazed, and overjoyed at the prospect of a wedding in the family. They had known Mr. Ockleston all their lives, and wished sincerely that Mary Martha would accept him. He was a near neighbour, and belonged to the people who had never done

anything, which was the local way of defining the condition of country gentlemen who lived on hereditary property, and were not engaged in any of the many professions and trades which kept the money mill going in the adjacent city of Blackchester, seven miles off by rail—from Saxby, that is.

When the sisters returned from their walk Mrs. Sheffield informed them in a few words of Mary Martha's behaviour; and during the quarter of an hour before luncheon they devoted themselves to interviewing her on the subject.

"We were *so* hoping that you would; M. M.," Elizabeth says, as if patiently resenting an injury.

"That I would what?" M. M. inquires with exasperating calm—she is still busy with those school library books.

"That you would accept Mr. Ockleston."

"No thank you—not to please you."

"To please yourself, then?"

"I *detest* him!"

"Nobody believes you."

Elizabeth has published her manifesto, and Jane takes up the argument. "Why do you suddenly detest Mr. Ockleston, M. M.?" says she.

"Because he has become *detestable*."

"That is frank. But how has he become detestable? You are really very fond of him."

Mary Martha turns her eyes upwards, appealing to the gods: "Hear that! Are you anxious to marry everybody you are really very fond of? You are fond of everybody—*everybody*," she cries with energy.

Jane laughs, and retires discomfited. Her heart is large, and embraces all the world philanthropically. Ann comes forward.

"It is just your perversity, M. M. If Mr. Ockleston only *looked* at Kitty Clewer, I should like to see your face. He has been undecided between you for many years. At last he has made up his mind that it will be the greater kindness to choose

you—to save you being sent out of the country. Kitty Clewer can take care of herself."

"I should rather think she could—she's old enough. Mr. Ockleston is welcome to Kitty Clewer for me!" M. M. says with lofty disdain.

"Don't fly into a passion. There's no fear of Kitty Clewer. Listen while I enumerate the advantages of the situation——"

"Pray don't trouble yourself."

"It is a pleasure, M. M. We want to see you married——"

"I call that cool—*cool*! You want to see *me* married? But precedence belongs to *you*—and to *you*—and to *you*," says the little cousin, addressing graduated bows to the sisters politely.

"Don't interrupt. This is what you have to consider—whether it is wise to refuse a good offer? Mr. Ockleston's house is

charming—or will be when you are there—and just a nice distance for us to come and have afternoon tea with you. He is a gentleman; he'll be as good as gold to you—he'll love you best in the world. He'll give you a *pony shay*!" Now, a "*pony shay*" was what Mary Martha called the "top of her ambition."

"Ah, that would be lovely, a *pony shay*—but with one's *contemporary*!" M. M. says ecstatically. Then she rises and performs a graceful little pantomime of driving a "*pony shay*" to the door, and makes her exit with an emphasizing nod: "one's *contemporary*, you know."

With that nod, indicating the antithesis, Mary Martha hit the blot in Mr. Ockleston's proposal.

"Can she have a *contemporary* in her eye, I wonder?" says Elizabeth; and Jane and Ann both echo, "I wonder?" That a likely object of speculation had occurred to each of the sisters on the spot, and with

disconcerting force, seemed probable, for they became silent and pensive.

The announcement of the honour that had been done her did not repress Mary Martha's natural flow of spirits. She ate her luncheon enjoyingly, and afterwards took her walk; she had said there was "after luncheon," when the sisters went out for their constitutional in the morning. They liked to pay visits of an afternoon, or to drive into Blackchester, where they had always wants to supply at the stationer's, the mercer's, or the milliner's. It was not a pretty drive, half the way was through a monotonous suburb of dingy streets, and nine times in ten Mary Martha preferred the resources of Saxby. These resources were not very extensive or varied. Saxby had a Green, round which, interspersed with cottages of laborious natives, were cottages of gentility, original settlements of retired citizens out of Blackchester, poor places in the view of modern magnates, and long abandoned to other sorts of people

—reduced gentle-people some of them, and some of them failures out of the commercial battle, who found here their last refuge but one, and the last of all was not far to seek ; only across the Green, within the precincts of the ancient church, which looked warm and comfortable, folded in its spacious, tree-shadowed graveyard, and supported by the parson's house on the right-hand side, and by the squire's house on the left.

The squire was Mr. Ockleston, a gentleman born to that place and dignity sixty years since, at a period antecedent to even the earliest cottages of gentility upon the Green, and which he upheld on a very moderate fortune, in face of the floods of new riches inundating the country side, making no more account of them than of the overflowing of Saxby beck—making less, indeed, for these floods might ebb, and did, and Saxby beck would go on for ever. Mary Martha came on some traces of their ebb in the course of her walk. Mr. Sheffield's

place was Thornhill. The place adjoining was Ashcroft, and a board signifying that Ashcroft was to let or sell stood aslant amongst the tangled shrubbery about the lodge. M. M. stopped at the shabby gate, and wished that somebody would buy the house, put it in order, and come and live there. For three years and over it had been empty, a melancholy reminder of the ruined family who had once occupied it, and a drawback to the neighbourhood, shut up at the extremity of the moss-grown drive and with signs of casual stones in its damaged walls and windows.

Early afternoon was the quietest time of day about the village, and Mary Martha met nobody to speak to except a fine tall well-made young man, who was helping himself painfully along the grassy margin at the roadside with a crutch and a stick.

"You are out, John; you are on the mend I am glad to see," she said, addressing him in a cheerful, high voice.

“Yes, miss, thank you. They tell mother I shall never be much better, but I’m to try and get into the air. I was making my way up to Thornhill with doctor’s prescription;” the poor young fellow seemed sadly downhearted, and offered the slip of paper to Miss Brooke. It was a request that the bearer might be given a meal of meat daily for a week or two, to help him recover his strength after an accident that had maimed and disabled him for life.

“Mrs. Sheffield has driven into Blackchester; but go on, John, and ask for Mrs. Cutlett—her dispensary is always open,” Mary Martha said, and paused a minute, watching his slow progress with tears very near her eyes, and an ache in her heart.

It was to the Green that Mary Martha was going, and to a cottage nearly opposite the church, a little place primitive as any, but neat and graceful. The gate shut with a latch, the way to the door was paved, and the pent over it to throw off the rain was

kept clear of the honeysuckle that twined up the wall. M. M.'s coming was watched for, and an elderly lady showed her face at the window as the younger one appeared at the gate. They met with a warm embrace, like dear familiar friends, and M. M. was herself again.

"I have such news, Mrs. Holland," she began, without preamble, "Oh, *such* news! You'll never, *never* guess, so I'll tell you straight away—But perhaps you would *like* to guess? *Guess!* it's wonderful news!"

"I was never good at guessing. You may tell me, dear," Mrs. Holland said, alert to hear this wonderful news.

"Mr. Ockleston has been proposing to marry me—*me!* He does not *want* to, of course, but it is just like him, the dear kind old man, because he knows I quake at the thought of the wide world! You are petrified—but isn't it fun?"

Mrs. Holland did not seem to see the fun.

"It is a pity Mr. Ockleston should be so foolish—you would not think of it, I hope?" she said, with a measured gravity of exhortation, as imagining everything possible.

"Think of it? *No!* I bear a conscience!" M. M. cried forcibly.

"Does anybody seek to persuade you?"

"Not *seriously*—they tease. That's only natural."

"When was it, dear, and how?"

"I don't know when it was, nor how, but Aunt Martha told me at noon, when the others were out of the way."

"Were you taken by surprise?"

M. M. did not answer on the instant. She reflected, and then she said she could not *quite* exactly say. "He never made *love* to me," she went on, with an air of particularity. "He *never* deviated from Mary Martha'—and could anybody be made love to by such a name?" she demanded, striking an attitude of pathetic, desperate appeal.

"*Mary Martha?*" echoed a voice behind her in soft wooing accents.

She turned round with a ready curtsy. "Your servant, sir," she said, and the two blushed mystically.

It was like flint and steel, a momentary spark of collision; they were not acquainted to the rallying point, and M. M.'s retreat was expeditious. The new-comer was her contemporary, a manly young fellow, chestnut-bearded, well-tanned, and gifted with an exceedingly pleasant voice. Mary Martha's blush was the impromptu of a sudden feeling, and vanishing, left her a little paler than usual; but his stayed, and the warmth of it shone in his eyes for a long while after.

"You came upon us without warning—how did you get in?" Mrs. Holland inquired, though the way was obvious.

"By the door. I heard voices, and the door was open."

Mary Martha would have liked to know

how much he had heard, but it was impossible to ask. Her contemporary was Mrs. Holland's nephew, a pupil of Sir John Hardy, the civil engineer, sent down into those parts to help superintend the making of a loop-line which was to bring unexplored country places into communication with Blackchester. His name was George Marriott, "of the Marriotts of Stockleigh," Mrs. Holland was wont to mention (some people thought quite unnecessarily) when she introduced him to her Saxby friends. But Mrs. Holland was extremely poor, and, unless her family pride had sustained her, must have sunk to a mere nobody in this monied region of manufacturers. George spent occasional Sundays at Saxby, and Mrs. Holland talked of him to Mary Martha with praise and circumstance; she also talked of M. M. to him until a sense of knowledge much beyond his opportunities pervaded his mind. She had no deep design in it. Her subjects of conversation were few

and limited, and they were simply the two young people in the world she loved best. The consequence was that they had grown interested the one in the other on the very slightest foundation. Mr. George Marriott had been received in the neighbourhood with the hospitable welcome customarily extended to gentlemen unattached, and had met the Miss Sheffields in silk attire and high company ; but Miss Brooke he had met only in this cottage parlour, in summer morning cotton gown, and straw hat with a poke to screen her eyes. Those poke hats, he thought, cast a becoming shade over her face, and sketched well. He had tried it. The hat was a bit of picturesque, and the face under it a study of fair ladyhood.

That instantaneous spark, that blush of consciousness, may stand for the initial letter of a new chapter in their acquaintance. Mary Martha had held Mr. George Marriott lightly in her fancy before she retorted on her cousin Jane that a “pony-shay” would be

lovely, with one's *contemporary*; but it was the spoken word that equipped him with real significance, and made of themselves, two, a group in a "pony-shay." M. M. blushed many times again when she thought of it, and thanked her stars that thought-reading was a science only in its infancy yet. She had come to spend the afternoon at the cottage, and the visit was memorable. Mrs. Holland possessed a shabby piano, which was an excuse for a song, perched on the music stool, and singing without notes. Mary Martha sung thus for her friend constantly. She had a sweet pipe, and loved to tune it when she was happy. The method was quaint, but an agreeable change from conversation. George Marriott found it amusing, and begged Miss Brooke to go on singing, and she made no difficulty, only asking what she should sing. It was easier than talking; in talking she was often at a loss what to say. In singing she just threw back her head, opened her mouth, and melody poured forth

as if she were a thrush in spring time. George inquired if she had seen the royal song-books, and was anxious to lend her his—the choicest old songs and settings, he said they were, English and Scotch, Welsh and Irish, and might he send them to Thornhill?

“Unfortunately we have them all,” said M. M., and was sorry that the useful link of a loan could not be established.

There were other ways, however. Miss Sheffield had mentioned to Mr. George Marriott that they played tennis at Thornhill, from four o’clock to seven on Saturday afternoons, if he cared to join their game. Did Miss Brooke play? he asked: “But of course you do,” he added, reflecting that she looked most charmingly like it.

“Oh yes, we all play,” M. M. said. “We shall have a grand tournament to close the season. The ladies’ first prize is a string of Indian beads. The gentlemen’s is a beautiful racket. Come and practise for it—everybody comes.”

"I will," said George.

Then Mary Martha stood up to go away. There were many last words. Finally Mrs. Holland walked with her to the gate. "It was a pity George came just when he did. I should have liked to hear more of your wonderful news," she said.

"There is no more," M. M. replied, and walked away with a conclusive nod.

Mrs. Holland returned indoors, and began immediately to communicate to her nephew Mary Martha's private affairs: "Can you imagine Mr. Ockleston proposing for that dear little girl, George? She was telling me when you took us by surprise."

"Oh!" said George, and he appeared interested. He knew Mr. Ockleston, and that he should have proposed for Miss Brooke set that dear little girl on a pinnacle of greater consequence. The proposal was not detrimental to her in his eyes. Mr. Ockleston, barring the drawback of his sixty years, would have been a match for her betters.

"She is not twenty yet," Mrs. Holland continued. "It all comes of her poverty; Mr. Ockleston admires her, no doubt, but I do not believe that he would ever have dreamed of proposing to her if it had not been for her dread of having to leave Saxby."

George thought that improbable—gentlemen seldom marry from secondary motives of that nature. "Why should she leave Saxby unless she wishes it?" he asked.

"She does not wish it. But there are three unmarried daughters at Thornhill, and four girls in the house are too many, especially where one has no right. Still it must be allowed that they are very good to Mary Martha."

"They should give her a chance. It would be time enough to turn her adrift when she has cut her wisdom teeth."

"But what if she interferes with her cousins' chances? Mr. Ockleston's proposal will not lower her."

"No—anything but that. Why should she not accept him?"

"How can you ask such a question, George? I should have thought that *you* of all people would have called it a shame—May and December!"

"Oh! it is not December with Mr. Ockleston. It is no more than genial October. He is not an old man."

"But you must agree that Mary Martha is much too young for him, George?"

"There *is* a disparity," George admitted in a neutral tone, as if balancing the matter.

"I don't think that I ever saw you so contrary!"

Perhaps George was as deep as he was contrary; his good-humour never flagged. His attention wandered a little, but he quickly pulled himself up, with a reminder that it was a considerable while since he had seen Mr. Ockleston, and he would just step across the Green and call upon him. Mrs. Holland encouraged his dutiful resolve:

"Do, George," she said. "It would be a pity that you should neglect him—one of your father's oldest friends—and, indeed, a connection of our family, though remote."

CHAPTER III.

A GENTLEMAN OF THE OLD SCHOOL.

"A venerable aspect !

He bears the marks of many years well spent."

ROWE.

MR. OCKLESTON'S house faced the Green at less than twenty paces off. It was a substantial red-brick house of two storeys, with unimproved sash-windows towards the road. The entrance was into a hall paved with various marbles, and having a glass door somewhere that let in sunshine and sweetness from the garden on the other side. The library was on the garden side, and the drawing-room next it, spacious rooms both, and handsomely designed with the windows in a bow. Mr Ockleston was no recluse. He liked everything comfortable about him, according to his own notions of comfort, and

entertained company often. He was a Cambridge man, and had travelled and seen the world, but had never taken any part in public affairs. He was variously accomplished, and possessed the natural gift of taste. He liked the best literature, the best art. If he had a fault it was fastidiousness, a difficulty in being pleased. Ladies accounted for his bachelorhood on this ground, that he had never seen the woman who was perfect enough for him. That he had at last discovered her in Miss Brooke was an event likely to strike them with amazement—not but that they would all have said she was a very nice little girl.

Mr. George Marriott was ushered into the library where Mr. Ockleston sat in his easy-chair between the hearth and a side-window which threw a full light upon the London paper. He was reading, or seeming to read it—perhaps there had been days when the news was more absorbing. George's accost was frank, Mr. Ockleston's was cordial—an hereditary connection is firm ground to go

upon, and may easily grow into friendliness between old and young. George rather expected to see a change and development in the elderly gentleman gone courting to a girl, and was prepared to be amused thereby, not considering the habitual reserve and guardedness of mature experience ; but Mr. Ockleston appeared as cool, collected and pleasant, and as glad to see a visitor as if life were jogging on with him in its accustomed groove. He was a tall, spare figure ; his head finely shapen, his features thin and distinct. He had scanty hair and grey. His look was shrewd, but his smile had a singular sweetness, and, indeed, there could be nowhere a wiser or kinder heart. He began to ask George about his own people, and how long it was since he had been at Stockleigh, and they got into a general conversation on his family affairs. Of his own, George had nothing to tell but what was hopeful.

“Dolly writes that my father has had his customary fit of the gout and is well again ;

but the leading event at home is that my mother has taken to cultivating her garden in default of eyes to read and work as she did. And there is a likelihood of another wedding in the house, by-and-by—Dolly's own."

"Dear Dolly! And when she goes your father and mother will be alone; but perhaps they will not care?"

"Not a bit. They will be like lovers again; they will pay each other a devoted attention. Dolly thinks that they rather look forward to it—particularly mother. And there will be Amy within call."

"Amy near Stockleigh? The last I heard of Amy was that she was frozen up in the Fens with her poor curate."

"Amy and her curate have got promotion. Her marriage is a success. She took the fancy of a stranger gone shooting wild-fowl about Whittlesea, who had Church preferment in his gift; he met her walking in thick boots, and heard a capital report of her. Then he went to hear her husband preach,

and was sure that they would do. He gave them the Vicarage of Hardenware, and as they are enthusiasts for work, and young and strong, perhaps they like it. Amy gives flourishing accounts of themselves. Their parish contains all sorts and conditions of men, to the number of eleven thousand. There is too much smoke, but Stockleigh is only twenty minutes off by train."

"I knew Amy would do. She made a reasonable choice. Suitability of character is the chief thing in marriage." Mr Ockleston paused on this original thought, or George imagined so. He continued, however, immediately: "And your brothers—are they all moving forward?"

"Yes, they are all right. Charlie is at Secunderabad, and has got a step. Frank is going into the Bank, by favour of Uncle Henry. And here am I till October; my father invites me as usual to spend the hunting season at home. Next spring I have the prospect of work in Spain."

"Spain is a fine country—you ought to see Spain. Your father did wisely in giving you a profession. You are much better off, and much better amused, engineering up and down the world, than hanging on at home idle, like so many eldest sons."

"My father is much too young of his age to have me waiting about to take his shoes. But he wants me to attach myself to Stockleigh, and to regard it as my home that is to be. Mother always says that when I marry I must bring my wife home to Stockleigh."

"But you are not dreaming of marrying yet, George, are you?" Mr. Ockleston inquired, much astonished.

"I have dreamed of it," George said, with a noble gravity.

"It is too early, George. Early marriages are a mistake for us. Look at Witherspoon. His wife is an old woman while he is as spry as ever he was—and with such a tribe of big boys and girls always at his heels."

"There must have been an immense dis-

parity to begin with. Perhaps she was rich, and he wanted her money? *I shall not marry my grandmother! I call such marriages wicked—quite wicked.*” George pronounced his judgment with intensity. He knew Miss Brooke’s way of stating her opinions and echoing her strong words, and did like her, producing a similar effect of being in fun and in earnest too.

Mr. Ockleston felt confused, and a faint red appeared on his thin cheek. He spoke mildly. “Let us take a turn in my garden, George; you have not seen my roses yet,” he said; and George rose alertly. But the turn in the garden was short, and brought them soon into the neighbourhood of the gate. The next minute George found himself outside it, with the sensations of a visitor dismissed before he was prepared to go.

He went away laughing, delighted with his successful, impromptu bit of mischief. His arrow had gone home. His mimicry of Mary Martha was perfect—was patent to Mr. Ockleston, and would have been to any one of her

acquaintance. Mr. Ockleston could not surmise that his *proposal* had been published, but the coincidence was remarkable. Was it likely that George had pretensions in the same quarter? Callow young creatures see the ridiculous in everybody but themselves, and if an understanding existed between those two, M. M. was quite capable of revealing the tale of her old lover's worship as it dawned on her maiden consciousness. The suspicion was distressing in the highest degree.

Mary Martha was misled by Ann's notion that Mr. Ockleston's proposal was one of simple charity to which he was impelled by the desire to rescue her from an unworthy fate—or perhaps she was not misled, but only adopted it. He sought her for his wife because she pleased him, and he had always been intending to marry some time. For a year or two past he had watched her with an interest very different from the interest he took in her excellent cousins, and just now some little word or act of hers had struck him convincingly that the time was come. It argued a good conceit

of himself that he had not realized his years as an impediment to his suit, and that he did not anticipate an unfavourable answer. He had not pressed for an instant reply ; he had asked only that his proposal might be laid before his dear young friend, and that those who stood her in the stead of father and mother would encourage her to entertain it. He was used to take life gently, and had not been averse to suffer a term of happy suspense. But had George forestalled him ?

Mr. Ockleston retreated indoors. The garden was too gay for his altered mood. On the plea of excluding the afternoon glow he moved hither and thither about his silent house, lowering the blinds, and savouring his strange pain. There was a fitness in his surroundings that struck him in a novel aspect. He was accustomed to keep everything in exactest order and repair, and got rid of nothing until it had paid its debt in service. To exchange his father's fine old tables and chairs of Spanish mahogany and Gillows' make

for modern oak, or ebony, or walnut, would have seemed to him sheer waste of money; and also he thought the modern furniture not to compare for value with his antiquated possessions, in which the elbow-polish of generations had brought out the rich tones of the most beautiful wood ever put to the use of cabinetry. Every piece was perfect of its kind, and made to suit its place. The least change would spoil the harmony of the whole effect—and also he loved the familiar face of his belongings. But as he went slowly to and fro, reflecting and considering, it occurred to his mind that both the house and its master had dropped behind the age. His house was as unlike Thornhill as he was unlike George; and Mary Martha was a joyous little bird of spring, only threatened with a cage and exile from her native bushes. The chance of taming her for his own garden had seemed actually given him, when this male contemporary put in his mocking note, calling marriages with grandmothers (and grand-

fathers equally, of course) wicked, quite *wicked*. Mr. Ockleston could hear and see Mary Martha saying the same words with the self-same air of intense disapproval. The vision distressed him with a mortifying sense of having taken a long step where there was perhaps no solid ground to sustain him. His pride was hurt; and yet he could have been sure that Mary Martha cared for him sincerely. She had given him many signs and tokens of confidence and preference; in this he could not have been mistaken.

In justice to both it may be granted. M. M. had cared for Mr. Ockleston as for a paternal sort of superior person since before she could speak plain, and had been brought up to show him that respect. She was sensible of being his favourite amongst his young neighbours, and that had given to her behaviour an easy, happy grace, very taking and very gratifying. When Mr. Ockleston had a garden-party he contrived that Miss Brooke should appear at home by making her

of use amongst his guests ; and at his afternoon-teas with music he would always invite her to sing the first song. Matrons smiled on her with benignity in that position, and gave Mr. Ockleston credit as a man of taste because she made a pretty picture so. But as for his proposing marriage to her, that had never entered into anybody's speculations.

There was Kitty Clewer unmarried still. The popular sentiment was that he would end with Kitty, though the popular sentiment was also that she did not deserve him. It was an old story how Mr. Ockleston had fallen in love with Kitty (as much as twenty years ago, when she was newly come out) and how badly Kitty had used him. She led him a capricious dance amongst a dozen other suitors, until one day he bowed over her fair hand, and finally dropped it, relinquishing his share of her miscellaneous affections with very little regret. While she was beautiful and young Kitty could never fix her affections ; now that she was neither her occupation was gone, and

she kept an envious heart for the favours she had slighted. She lived with her mother in a house on the Green, the next but one to Mrs. Holland. They were poor with the poverty of gentlefolks deeply indebted, who can never hope to clear themselves, but with whom tradespeople have patience lest they should lose all. They did live at Ashcroft, but when it became imperative to cut down their expenses, they courageously retired to the Green, on the prudent plea that to have known better days at Saxby would be a defence against the hardships of worse, and they would be amongst friends. They knew everybody, and everybody was good to them for old acquaintance' sake. The house they occupied was the property of Mr. Ockleston, and he was, no doubt, especially good and considerate in his relation of landlord to such tenants. But his neighbours misjudged him profoundly who believed that any dormant spark of love for Kitty still survived amidst the embers of his former fires.

CHAPTER IV.

A GAME OF TENNIS.

“Love is ever busy with his shuttle.”

LONGFELLOW.

MR. SHEFFIELD returned home from Blackchester with his family. They were close packed in the carriage, but nobody minded that ; they were fond of one another ; kind, affectionate people, old-fashioned in their ways rather than fine.

“And what does Mary Martha say to Mr. Ockleston’s proposal ?” was his interested inquiry when they were well started on the road.

“She says ‘*No*’ to it,” his wife replied.

“Very tiresome of her. We wish she would,” Elizabeth added.

“Why do you wish she would ?” her father asked.

“Because it would be so nice for us,” Jane answered.

“And then she need not fear being thrown on the wide world,” Ann concluded.

“It would not tell very well for you if she could not stay amongst us, and let there be an end of scheming for it,” their father said.

Mr. Sheffield sounded tired. He was glad that Mary Martha had more wit than to incline to a proposal which seemed to him the foolishhest thing that he had heard for a long while, but he had a multiplicity of other things to think of, and being answered to his satisfaction on that, he let it pass and composed himself, with folded arms and eyes shut, for forty winks in the lulling open air. Silence reigned amongst the ladies in deference to his fatigue until they reached the Green, when Elizabeth offered the remark that Mr. Ockleston was going across to call on Kitty Clewer. The others looked that way just in time to see him close the gate, and all began to speak their sentiments together : the sum

of them being that they should let M. M. know, and what fun it would be to hear how she would take it. The buzz failed to rouse Mr. Sheffield, who did not wake when the carriage turned in at the gate to Thornhill. When it stopped at the door, and the ladies were waiting to disembark, Elizabeth shook him gently by the arm.

"I feel uncommonly heavy," he said then, and got down, pressing his hand to his forehead.

"Have you been more bothered than usual, John? Leave the girls to help themselves," his wife said tenderly.

The pair passed out of sight into the library, and the girls went upstairs to the old school-room where they lived most working hours of the summer days. Mary Martha was in before them, and dressed for dinner already, fresh and pretty in India muslin and yellow roses off the tree, but busy again with those school library books. The sisters made haste to relate what they had witnessed on the

Green. "Mr. Ockleston going to call on Kitty Clewer, to take afternoon-tea," Ann suggested.

"I hate her!" said the little cousin concisely. "It may not be very *Christian*, but I *hate* her!" and M. M. stood up, stiffly erect, expressive of wickedness from top to toe.

"Why do you hate her more to-day than yesterday? Yesterday you only despised her," Jane said in cross-examining style.

"Because I am afraid of her. She is such an *awful* storyteller."

"That is no new thing. Everybody knows how to take what Kitty says. A dog would not get a bad name for Kitty's calling him a thief."

"The one consideration that might prevail with me to accept Mr. Ockleston would be to save him from Kitty Clewer," M. M. said firmly, and looked round with much solemnity at each of the sisters in turn.

"That would do it to a certainty—that,

and nothing else. If you disappoint him it will happen—you will *see* it will," Ann assured her.

"If I were thirty—if I were five-and-twenty even—I would accept him on the spot! But what sort of company should we be for one another. I am so *wick* there would soon be an end of him, dear kind old man! And just figure to yourselves his feelings if he heard me use that unexpected word?"

"Mr. Ockleston will raise your taste and refine your diction. He recites poetry beautifully."

"I don't care for poetry unless it is easy to take in—and reciting might become *very* oppressive. Mr. Ockleston is an authority on disputed readings of ancient writers—Wynkyn de Worde, Piers Plowman, and so forth. Suppose that by way of a little light amusement he undertook to instruct me in the same—and suppose that, tiring of it, I grew perverse and cross, which is *quite* possible?"

"That is special pleading, M. M. We

would warrant you to be perverse and cross with anybody, at times," Elizabeth said severely.

"With my *contemporary*?"

"Yes, with your *contemporary*. I wish you would put a name to your contemporary, M. M."

"No, thank you, dear. I'll leave that to himself—to *himself*, you know."

The sisters had almost made up their minds who M. M.'s contemporary—her *ideal* contemporary—was, but judiciously kept their conclusions to themselves yet. From the first Mr. George Marriott had struck them each and all as a very agreeable person, and they had learnt since that he was more than agreeable—that he was eligible in a matrimonial point of view. Mrs. Holland had not hidden his light under a bushel. They knew that he was an eldest son with a good inheritance in prospect and a good appointment in possession. His age was four or five and twenty, and he looked and talked like a

man who might be naturally disposed to settle in life when he happened to fall in love with a suitable partner. The sisters felt that any one of themselves was suitable, and none would have stood in the way of another; but if M. M. came in the way it was likely there would be feud. It had occurred before.

Mr. Sheffield was a sensible and politic father, who expressed himself hopeful of seeing his daughters safe in the houses of good husbands before they lost his protection, and there had appeared upon the scene about a year ago a gentleman who made advances to the whole family, and was just beginning to show particular attentions to Elizabeth when Mary Martha arrived at home, and without the smallest effort or design diverted them to herself; and what was less pardonable, scouted them utterly when they came to a premature declaration of love within two weeks of their becoming acquainted. Elizabeth was cruelly mortified, and her mother was mortified for her; and Jane and Ann, making common

cause with their sister, railed against M. M. as a little Marplot and a little monkey, which M. M. deprecated between laughter and tears; only holding fast to one proposition throughout — that from such a *weathercock* they were all well delivered. Mr. Sheffield professed to think so too. He would not have Mary Martha vexed about the episode, and made light of it, not blaming her at all, but rather taking her part, which was grievous to his wife and daughters. Jane said with some point that if M. M. had condescended to make her profit of other people's loss they could have excused her, but to cast away a good offer in a world where good offers were scarce was really too bad of her.

It was out of these circumstances arose the feeling that the little cousin could be very well dispensed with at Thornhill. Elizabeth bore no malice, but it had been serious with her; her heart had suffered, and if M. M. could be transported to fresh fields and

pastures new without unkindness, she was prepared to kiss her and say good-by with a forgiving sense of justice done. Since the introduction of Mr. George Marriott, Mrs. Sheffield and all her daughters had combined in resolving that something must be arranged for Mary Martha—in her own interest even, and whether papa was willing or not. M. M. had withstood the plan as too strange to be true, and had opened her mind freely to Mrs. Holland, who condemned it as a borrowing of trouble, but feared there might be no help for her unless in some member of the nobler sex outside.

Mr. Ockleston's proposal had fallen on good ground so far as the condition and lie of the land were concerned, but these were not everything. The proposal itself was not a good sample of seed, and even if it took root and sprang up, blade, ear, and corn in the ear, it could be but thin, parched corn, never a mouthful of good, sweet bread such as is the staff of life. Yet this was what

they were ready to sow in Mary Martha's field. M. M. might laugh and make fun of it, and she did ; but there was another aspect of the question which, failing a happier alternative, Mrs. Holland knew might come to be the child's own afterthought—that parched corn with a kind old friend is better than a field untilled, better than thorns and briars, and stones and stumblings on the waysides of this difficult world.

There was an hour of daylight after dinner in the beautiful drawing-room, and the girls had it to themselves. Mrs. Sheffield frequently stayed with her husband, and her doing so this evening gave rise to no remark. Elizabeth betook herself to the piano, and played low-toned melodies that were a pleasant accompaniment to silence. Jane had in hand her white wool knitting, and Ann moved up and down musingly with a frequent eye on Mary Martha, who was simply gazing out of window, lost in a reverie of clouds and sweet music. She tired of gazing by-and-by,

and turned about, and said, addressing herself to anybody who might wish to enter into conversation: "Pray, what did you all see and do in Blackchester this afternoon?"

"It would be a tedious recital, M. M.," Ann responded, coming to a rest and looking observant. "Pray, what did *you* see and do in our absence?"

Mary Martha was self-conscious and blushed, but answered truly: "I went for my walk to the Green, and spent an hour with Mrs. Holland. There I sat on the music-stool, and sang songs without notes—and I told her my wonderful news. On the way I saw poor John Crocker limping up here to eat a portion of mutton, and exchanged compliments with him. And at Mrs. Holland's I saw Mr. George Marriott—to whom I said that there is tennis here on Saturday afternoons—and told him of our tournament that is coming off at the end of the season."

"Oh, of *our* tournament that is coming off at the end of the season?" Ann repeated with

the least possible emphasis, but strong enough to convey much meaning. She had averted her eyes from M. M.'s face before, in pity of her burning cheeks, and now she resumed her slow pacing to and fro.

Jane just cast a glance at M. M., and met her glance roving distressfully from one to another of them. Elizabeth went on playing until presently, with a swift, impetuous movement, Mary Martha absconded. As the door shut upon her Elizabeth finished her tune, and rose from the piano, saying: "It would not be very difficult to put a name to M. M.'s contemporary now."

"Mr. George Marriott," said Jane, and Ann nodded that "Mr. George Marriott" was her opinion too.

"Mr. Ockleston's proposal will be a spur to him if he means anything. Those affairs always come to a crisis suddenly," Elizabeth said.

"I had no idea they were so well ac-

quainted that M. M. need blush at speaking of him," Ann remarked.

"Did she blush?"

"Her face must be hot still. I never saw her with such a guilty face."

Ann's word was the truth. A sense of shame, new and scorching as fire, had set M. M.'s face suddenly aflame. It went on blazing in the retreat of her own room, and the pain forced tears, real tears, to overflow from eyes not much given to weeping.

"I do wish, I *do* wish I belonged to them!" was her passionate murmur. "They want me to go. They don't care for me like one of themselves. Yes, they want me to go—to go," M. M. cried and sobbed.

Thornhill had been a most kindly and happy home to her. They had been all her very good friends, but she was *not* one of themselves. That was pitifully true, though never till now had she realized it, never till now had she even imagined it. A mere intonation of Ann's voice had told the whole

story. She thought her heart was broken, and she should never get over it. Neither that evening nor the next day did she make any show of recovering her spirits. She went about very subdued, and was much rallied and much entreated to say what depressed her. On the third day, the Saturday, when there was to be tennis in the afternoon, she was missing from the customary morning work.

"Does anybody know where M. M. is?" Elizabeth inquired casually. "She has forgotten Mudie's box." To gather up the books to be returned in Mudie's fortnightly box was a duty that had devolved on Mary Martha at leaving school.

Jane had to go downstairs, and said she would ascertain on the way if M. M. was in her room. She was in her room, and with a curious confusion around her. Jane halted in the doorway; there seemed no space to enter.

"What *are* you doing, M. M.?" she asked in wonderment.

"Turning over my tréasures ; preparing for a move," said M. M., who was on her knees in front of a sea-going traveller's trunk.

"Good gracious!" Exclamation was more pertinent than comment.

A few months ago Mary Martha had arranged on the wall a trophy of her father's dress sword and other military trappings, and had hung up his miniature and her mother's, to make a sort of shrine for their memory in her pretty room. It was very pretty, and she had felt for it as her very own where she must abide an indefinite long while—and now, already, a change impended over her. Mrs. Sheffield had at the same time put her in possession of this trunk, which contained all worth preserving that had been sent home with her from Bombay : chiefly ornaments, boxes, and a shawl or two. Jane, looking on

with a strained, uncomfortable feeling, pretended to covet one of the shawls.

"I was going to give that to Elizabeth; I should be drowned in it," M. M. said, sitting back on her heels.

"Oh, I did not mean that I wanted the shawl! It is worth ever so much money," Jane made haste to declare.

"It is for Elizabeth," M. M. replied. "Choose you, Jane, what you would like. There's another shawl—take that."

"No, no, no, M. M.; I am not going to steal your little fortune. People sell such things."

"But I want to give you a keepsake. *Do* take something. There's a box of chess over yonder—have that."

"Nonsense! It would be a lovely feature in a house of your own."

"Then here's a bamboo basket, beautiful fine work. It is full of silks and gold thread—it would hold your knitting," M. M. urged, offering it eagerly. She was in a

hurried mood, excited and flushed, and when Jane shook her head at the basket, refusing it, she tossed it away across the room ; the lid fell off, and the gay colours, clews and skeins, rolled out. "Then what *will* you have? *Choose*," she said pettishly.

"If I must have anything, I would rather have a shawl—I'll have this white one," Jane answered to humour her, and picked it up.

Mary Martha looked at her with wistful pathetic eyes: "It is just that white shawl I want to keep for myself," she said, pleading her right, as if it were scarcely her right. "See, it has such a dear little border, it is wool and silk, so soft and fine you could draw it through a ring;" and she took it in her hand, brought a fold over her head, and wrapped the rest close about her.

"I'll have the bamboo basket—I love a basket," Jane said then, and stepped dextrously through the chaos to assume her property.

"Have the chess-box too, it is delicious sandal-wood, the basket is not much; Ann

shall have that desk. It does not seem to have been used, and there is a work-box like it, all inlaid with ivory—perhaps mother was bringing them home for some of you. These two little brass devils—or are they gods?—with hollow heads for tapers, Kitty Clewer would be in raptures with : she shall get them for a kiss of peace.”

Mary Martha looked up. Jane was gone and Elizabeth stood in the doorway. “You have forgotten Mudie’s box, M. M.,” said she, but added at a gesture of despair : “Never mind, Ann is doing it. I want you to come out with me, to carry John Crocker his portion of mutton. He is worse again, and won’t walk up to day. Doctor Thorpe has just said so.”

“Has Doctor Thorpe been here? Who wanted him?” M. M. asked, diverted easily from herself when anybody else’s trouble was suggested.

“Papa—he is not well since yesterday. He is not gone into town this morning.”

While Elizabeth offered this explanation, she opened M. M.'s wardrobe, and gave her out her hat. Her own was already on; not much dressing was needed for a cottage visit before luncheon at Saxby.

"It is shorter work to empty a big box and throw the things about, than to put them tidily away again," she said, and reprovingly surveyed the chaos which the little cousin seemed perfectly willing to leave in possession of her room.

M. M. cast a penitent eye on the disorder, and promised to set it to rights when she had breathed a little fresh air; but Elizabeth, on the way out, considerably called to her sisters to set it to rights for her. M. M. opened her mouth to forbid them, but Elizabeth stopped her.

"You have been tiring yourself quite unnecessarily, as if there were not tennis this afternoon. You may carry John's mutton—here, take the basket, and let that content you. It is not etiquette for a girl who has

just had an offer of marriage to begin making presents—she expects to receive presents—and the key of that great trunk is to be given back to mother. To think of bestowing those sweet little Benares devils on Kitty Clewer !”

Mary Martha was disconcerted but not hurt at being taken peremptorily in hand by Elizabeth. Elizabeth had always exercised rule over her, and it helped, with the fresh air, to restore her balance. She was not disposed to talk, and on their return Elizabeth found an opportunity of advising her sisters that they must be tender and careful of M. M., who was a sensitive little mortal, more of a baby than a woman yet, and perhaps not strong ; and they promised to mind and remember.

In the afternoon there was the tennis.

Mr. George Marriott arrived a good while before anybody else, and it fell to Miss Sheffield and Miss Brooke to receive and entertain him. The girls took it in turns by

twos and twos to do the duties of reception, and it was their turn to-day. He apologized for coming early, but said he understood that the hour was four o'clock.

"From four to half-past, and we play till seven. We have three courts in our field, will you come and see it?" Elizabeth said, and led the way.

It was a delightful ground, lying under a natural slope overhung with shady trees, where those who did not play could rest and watch the players.

Tennis is a game that affords opportunity for original taste in dress, and some of the dresses were very becoming. Elizabeth Sheffield's was. She had worked it herself with forget-me-nots and rosebuds on Saxony flannel, and her straw hat was trimmed with bunches of the flowers twined with knots of ribbon. Tennis shoes are the despair of pretty feet, but as Elizabeth was not to play, she had put on buckled shoes, perfect of their size. Mary Martha wore pure yellow and

white sateen, a combination that sounds ill, but looks well in a garden, like jonquils and white crocuses growing out of the grass. Her hat was fine Italian straw, and her buckled shoes and black silk, gold-clocked stockings of exceeding nicety; for neither was she to engage in the game, unless particularly called on, when she could change her shoes.

Miss Sheffield asked Mr. George Marriott why he had not brought Mrs. Holland. He said that he could not persuade her.

"Oh, but I shall persuade her!" cried M. M., and with a little compelling nod, turned instantly to set off.

"Pray, let me accompany you," said George, and the influx of other company covered their exit.

Elizabeth felt rather vexedly that Mary Martha had forgotten herself, and taken Mr. George Marriott away in the most absurd manner. But it was like her childishness, to act on the spur of the moment, never reflect-

ing how her actions might appear to other persons.

They two seemed well pleased to find themselves out on the road alone, but walked apace like people going on an errand, meeting and greeting briefly other elements of Saxby society flowing towards Thornhill. Mrs. Holland asked no questions and showed no surprise when they presented themselves at the cottage ; but if she had really held back from the tennis party she had repented now, and was ready, all but buttoning her new gloves. She said something about George being impatient, and herself not liking to be hurried, and the ingenuous young fellow glowed and laughed, while Mary Martha replied softly that it did not matter, and they would be company for her returning.

They returned, however, a quartette ; for as they passed Mrs. Clewer's gate Kitty emerged and joined them. Kitty had no diffidence in attaching herself to Mrs. Holland at any time ; they were next-door

neighbours, and it was Kitty's custom to take it for granted that they were also best friends. George Marriott was manœuvring to let his aunt go on with her, and to keep M. M. to himself a little longer; but Kitty loved the escort of a gentleman, and drew him off with a surprise inquiry about Sir John Hardy, whom George honoured as his chief.

"We were little playfellows when we were children, our gardens joined," said Kitty, and launched out on the broads of her imagination with old stories in which there was hardly a ripple of truth, though they were detailed with all the circumstance and sequence of familiar fact.

Kitty was enjoying a triumph, but Mary Martha could not forbear the reflection that it was dreadful, quite *dreadful*, to be such a frump. Though grown very fat, Kitty adhered to her favourite light colours and coquettish style, cheapened by inexorable poverty. In male company her airs of

fascination revived, and as she sidled into the gardens at Thornhill, people who called her beautiful when young, asked themselves by what magic she was transformed into an object so displeasing.

Elizabeth Sheffield, welcoming the new comers, perceived that Mary Martha was being punished for her inadvertency, and that Mr. George Marriott was, perhaps, bored, and yielding to her natural benevolence, she told M. M. that she was wanted on the tennis-ground. Players had fallen short that afternoon. To Mr. George Marriott she said, that he must not run away again—Mrs. Holland was well acquainted with the road to Thornhill—a meaning word which he understood in the sense of a gentle rebuke and bowed to.

M. M. ran off to change her shoes at the first hint that she might go and play. She was a buoyant spirit, and the present moment everything with her yet. Very soon she was back, and paired with George,

the two gracefulest figures in the field. The family kept up M. M.'s pet name of the little cousin, but though a lighter weight she was as tall as any of the sisters. Her swift agility and precision of stroke were excellent qualities in a partner and charming to behold, and George's animation and dexterity were equally admired. Even the mother of two daughters no longer young, whose exertions in the game were likened to the leaps and bounds of kangaroos, was moved to say how well they played, and to wish that her own offspring would cease to risk themselves beyond the measured paces of a walk.

Mr. Sheffield was not allowed out of doors to-day, and his wife went and came between the garden and her sitting-room upstairs, where she had made him comfortable near the window to watch the company, in hopes that he might be amused. He was apt to be low when ailing, and discouraged about the future of his family, for whom he had

not made all the provision that he had once expected to make ; but Mary Martha's affairs were uppermost just now, and after praising her and her partner, he said that Ockleston should be there—to see M. M. at tennis would be a corrective of his foolishness. Mrs. Sheffield thought it would be none ; he had seen M. M. at tennis often.

“What is to be done with her ?” Mr. Sheffield inquired, after a silence, deprecating by his tone any measure of severity.

“I don't know. She must go away for a change somewhere.”

“But where ? Not amongst strangers ?”

“I have been thinking of her Aunt Lena—let us get to-morrow over.”

Mr. Ockleston had been offered his *quictus* yesterday, and had declined receiving it unless from the lips of his dear young friend, and Sunday afternoon had been appointed for the interview—that was why Mrs. Sheffield said, “Let us get to-morrow over.” M. M. was not warned of the ordeal that

awaited her, and was not to be warned, but to be taken unawares. This was the sisters' policy; all concurred in it. They were influenced by a conviction that when the play was played out the curtain would fall on the little cousin in the new character of Mrs. Ockleston. M. M. could make fun in resisting, and she could make pathos, but they had never known her stubborn or tenaciously persistent in a self-chosen course. Final subjection had hitherto invariably followed on revolt. But perhaps that was because she had fallen into no vital straits yet, such as truly test and try a character.

Mrs. Sheffield had been thinking of her Aunt Lena as a resource in the event of obstinate impenitency. Aunt Lena was only a name to Mary Martha, but a dear name of respect—her father's sister. To Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield she was the heroine of a tragedy. Her marriage had been rash, and its end disastrous. There was neither

honour nor fortune behind the specious graces of Captain Devine. He was in her brother's regiment, and they were to have gone to India together; but at the eleventh hour he contrived an exchange, and was, shortly after, for reasons never fully explained, compelled to leave the service and the country. His wife went with him, and her friends at home said that it was the best thing that could have happened for both of them when they read his name amongst the deaths in *The Times*. She had two children to bring up, and stayed where she was, in a French country town, where existence was as little of a strain as it was likely to be anywhere. Letters blessing both senders and receivers were exchanged at Christmas between Thornhill and the house on the walls at St. Croix; and Mrs. Sheffield had decided that after to-morrow, be the event what it might, she would take Mrs. Devine into her counsels on her niece's affairs. Perhaps an arrangement could be made for her to go to St. Croix,

and the novelty would please her. More than once since leaving school Mary Martha had wished that she knew Aunt Lena.

Everyone has noticed how minds meet when change is in the air. For days past, ever since that little contrariety involving the name of her contemporary, Mary Martha also had been musing of St. Croix, and wondering whether Aunt Lena and her cousins would like to see her. She had suddenly become interested to learn what anybody could tell her of French country life, and while taking a cup of tea with her partner at the door of the tent where Elizabeth was dispensing hospitality, she asked him if he had ever happened to pass by St. Croix. He said there were many of the name—where was her St. Croix? M. M. mentioned the wide regions of Normandy.

“It is a town where the fortifications are turned into houses and gardens. It must be very picturesque—don’t you think so?”

George did think so. "My Aunt Lena, Mrs. Devine, lives there," she went on to inform him. "She has two daughters, my cousins—they must be almost French girls, for they have never been over in England since they were quite small children."

"Your travels are yet to begin?" George said.

"Yes. I fancy that I should like it."

Elizabeth saw them come and go without regarding her any more than the teapot, and reflected that they must be far gone in mutual admiration to be so uncivil. She had no opportunity of observing them again until the afternoon was spent, and most of the company departed, when she found them in the hall together, Mr. George Marriott waiting apparently while Mary Martha read a letter, which had been delivered by the last post. It was a full letter and on thin foreign paper. Her speaking countenance was radiant with joyful astonishment.

"It is from Aunt Lena!" she cried out as

Elizabeth appeared. "She says will I go to St. Croix, and help her at Kate's wedding? Only think! Kate is to be married in a fortnight, and they are getting the clothes ready. How lovely! Thank Goodness!"

Mary Martha's gestures were more expressive even than her words. Her thanksgiving to Goodness was out of the depths of her natural piety. Goodness was her heavenly guardian. George Marriott watched the ebullition of her simplicity with much feeling. But she had lost sight of him. He was forgotten. It was to Elizabeth she had turned in this fresh phase of her happiness.

"You can go, M. M.; but I am much mistaken if you are not as piously thankful to come home again to Saxby," said her cousin.

Mary Martha was out of hearing now, halfway upstairs with her letter, carrying it to the heads of the family.

The heads of the family were, however, in possession of a letter of their own from St. Croix, and Mrs. Sheffield said how singular it was that it should come just as they were talking of Mrs. Devine. M. M. wanted to rush into discourse of it at once, but the others were perhaps indisposed to broach such a serious subject at that hour. It was dinner-time. The dressing-bell rang as she stood there.

"Come away, come away! papa is tired," said Elizabeth, appearing at the door.

"Yes, dear, leave it for the present. After to-morrow we will settle all about it," Mrs. Sheffield added persuasively.

"After to-morrow?" queried M. M.
"Why after to-morrow? What is to befall to-morrow?"

Elizabeth took her by the arm and carried her off, still asking: "What about to-morrow?" and still getting no answer.

CHAPTER V.

“AFTER TO-MORROW.”

“Here is one that wishes to live longer.”

BEN JONSON.

SAXBY at large crossed the Green to church, but Mr. Ockleston had not to cross the Green. He went through his garden and entered by a private door into a chapel, swept and garnished as a pew, which had a painted window of its own, and the walls and pavement set with memorial brasses of former Ocklestons whose dust was in the vault below. Here in the dim obscure the squire worshipped, invisible to the general congregation except during the singing of the psalms and hymns, when he came forward and stood in the arch opening to the chancel. The Thornhill family occupied a row of seats that faced

it, and were partially screened from the body of the church by the reading-desk and the pulpit. Rightly these seats belonged to the rector, but he had neither sons nor daughters to fill them, and his wife, who was hard of hearing, preferred another place where she could see his lips move to help out the muffled sound of his voice. Miss Brooke's niche was the lowest and best hidden, a situation she had seldom appreciated as it deserved. This morning she was rather glad of it—because of the dear old man opposite.

"Sing out—mind you sing out," Elizabeth said to her at the last moment before going into church. "Don't be silly and sentimental."

Mary Martha believed that her troubles were over, and sang out with a delight in it that announced a happy heart. She kept her eyes fast on her book, but her thoughts flew often over the way, and her mouth was not quite steady. No one could have accused her of laughing, but she might have been

asked what amused her. She was aware of Mr. Ockleston doing as usual, advancing and retiring as the music began and ceased, and though this had never struck her as odd before, it did now; and then came a vision of herself shadowily appearing and disappearing at his elbow. Once she looked up, but Mr. Ockleston was not regarding her at all, and she imagined that he might be feeling resentful of her unkindness. This idea gave her spirits an extra fillip, and her head was lifted in its customary pose, which signified to Jane, her next-hand neighbour, that she had found courage to look about her, and was not caring so much as she had pretended for sitting the whole morning in full view of Mr. Ockleston. She had even wished to sit with the schoolchildren, but Elizabeth had said, "Nonsense—and not unless she wanted to make Kitty Clewer talk," which was of course the very last thing in the world that she would have liked.

At coming out of church people fell into

groups, and exchanged compliments and inquiries returning to their homes. Mr. Sheffield's absence gave occasion for numerous inquiries, and Mary Martha had the opportunity of communicating to Mrs. Holland her invitation to St. Croix.

"Nothing could be better; it is the very thing for you; George told me," said her true, unselfish old friend.

Then Kitty Clewer came up, and made her a speech. "So you are going to St. Croix? I know St. Croix very well. We thought of living there once, but it was too dull for mamma. I could be happy anywhere, but mamma cannot exist without society. You will be missed *here*."

"I hope so," said M. M. crisply.

"But don't flatter yourself that you will be missed long. We shall learn to do without you," Kitty added, by way of planting a thorn.

Mary Martha did not retort. She looked and felt older on Sundays than weekdays,

and behaved accordingly. It was her silk dress and lace ruff and ruffles that did it, and the necessity of walking more demurely. They were approaching Mr. Ockleston's gate, and he was there for a word with his neighbours passing by. The sudden blush that tinted M. M.'s face did not escape observation. She could not bear to think that he was hurt or angry with her, and she looked up as pleased as a forgiven child. There was no stiffness or distance in his manner, and going on with Elizabeth she said quite gratefully how glad she was that they were to keep friends—*good friends.*

Nothing more transpired until the middle of the afternoon, when M. M. asked somebody to pin her up, that she might go and eat ripe gooseberries in the garden.

“Not in that pretty gown, surely?” Jane remonstrated; but Elizabeth glanced at the timepiece—it was on the stroke of four—and rose, and pinned her up without a word. It was a very pretty gown, a little check of

white and lilac, easily soiled and spoiled, and the petticoat under it finely tucked and trimmed with Scotch needlework.

Ann cautioned her not to tear her frills on the bushes, and said with prudential solemnity, "You were not made for a poor man's wife, M. M. Think better of Mr. Ockleston."

"They used to praise me at school for the feminine gifts of neatness and carefulness," M. M. answered, and then she marched off through the French window, the summer breeze blowing her soft golden brown hair all about, but carrying a parasol to save her complexion.

The sisters laughed stealthily as she vanished, and Elizabeth said, with bold metaphor, that she would walk straight into Mr. Ockleston's arms. And so she did. It was the Sunday afternoon privilege of familiar friends to enter at a lower gate, and come through the shrubbery that skirted the Thornhill domain, and there was Mr.

Ockleston availing himself of it. Tears flashed into M. M.'s eyes for vexation and fear of what was next to befall her. Thought is lightning swift, and she perceived that Mr. Ockleston had either refused to take his answer from the heads of the family, or that they had ventured to refer him to her. She suspected the latter, and her aspect was not conciliatory. Mr. Ockleston saw the tears and the defiance beyond them, and her careful pinning up all at once; and M. M. became conscious that it detracted from the strength of her position to have the wind playing about her ankles.

"I was on my way to the ripe gooseberries," she said, and blushed warmly.

"So I perceive," Mr. Ockleston answered, and stood still.

Then a cool pretence came to M. M. like an inspiration, and she made it in a fresh, even voice without a note of feigning: "And you are on your way up to the

house? They will be *so* glad. Uncle John has not been out all day."

"That was *not* my errand," Mr. Ockleston said, bending his kind regards upon her. "I am wanting a little conversation with you."

"Oh!" said M. M., and gasped, casting her appealing look upward.

Round the paddock there was a wide hedgerow in continuation of the shrubbery, and a walk in it, and thither, instead of to the gooseberries, Mary Martha had to go.

"You will not deny me a few words? I will not weary you overmuch. When an old friend seeks a favour which only you can grant, he should be heard with patience and courtesy," Mr. Ockleston pleaded.

"Yes, but nothing will change my mind—*nothing*! I hate to be selfish and disagreeable, but one has to consider oneself, and be *quite* determined on some points," M. M. said with impetuosity, and she began to walk quickly on.

Mr. Ockleston walked by her, his hands

clasped behind him, and gradually her pace moderated. Mary Martha's wilful tone wounded him, but he was prepared to exercise indulgence, and gave her a minute to recover. The afternoon was close in the woody hedgerow, and the winged insects were legion. Mr. Ockleston wore a curly brimmed hat, very glossy, reflecting the sun, and the midges circled round it like a halo. M. M. possessed herself sufficiently to think that a curly brimmed hat was hideous—*hideous*—particularly when enveloped in a cloud of flies, and after thinking it rather strenuously for two seconds, she protested against keeping on under the trees.

"It is really much pleasanter in the open garden. There are not nearly so many midges. And the gooseberries are in perfection—as big as any in the newspapers," she urged.

"I suppose that we shall have to go," said Mr. Ockleston, as yielding reluctantly to superior force.

"*Don't* go if you don't like, but *I* came out on purpose," M. M. rejoined sweetly.

They turned back. They were so far round the paddock that nothing was to be gained by turning back except the moral force of a decisive step. Mary Martha took it, and was herself again the moment her face was set the way she wanted to go.

"Can you listen to me now?" Mr. Ockleston inquired, and M. M. intimated a gentle resignation to the unavoidable.

Then Mr. Ockleston told his tale. Perhaps he told it too much at length, and was too explanatory of his good intentions. Mary Martha had not lived long enough in the world to have thought much of security, a competency, a house and social position. Her elementary view of marriage was the best company always there—one's *contemporary*, in fact, who would eat ripe gooseberries with one on Sunday afternoons, and not wear a shiny hat to attract the flies. She lost the thread of Mr. Ockleston's story and

put in little wrong notes and ejaculations. She was sensible of fervour in his speech, and of wishing that his voice were less moving, and suddenly she began to cry, because she felt by sympathy how deep and keen was the pain she had to inflict. They were still in the hedgerow, and plagued by the midges, but the gate to the gooseberries was in sight, and with an effort and great determination she gave him her answer.

“I cannot help it—and you must forgive me; but to be *married*—it would not do. I am firmly convinced that it would *not do*.”

“Why not?” Mr. Ockleston persisted, as his hand was on the latch of the gate.

“Oh, come and have some gooseberries!” M. M. rejoined, wisely evading the impossible task of rendering her reasons.

Mr. Ockleston was too sagacious to take offence. He did not mean to quarrel with Mary Martha. Time and chance happen to all men, and his dear young friend was a woman,

and therefore variable. She led the way to the bushes hoping, but scarcely expecting, to see some of her cousins busy there; but it was true, the net had been spread for her, and all the family were avoiding the garden. Mr. Ockleston sat in the shade of a clump of filberts while she plundered the fruit. He reflected on the situation, and calmed down to almost his normal tranquillity as he made up his mind to accept it—for the present. He reflected also on M. M.'s wonderful appetite for gooseberries, doubting whether so many could be good for her; till she emerged by-and-by, bearing in her two hands a vast leaf curved into a basket, and full of red and yellow champagnes, deliciously ripe, and cool and sweet as nectar.

"There! Those are for you—eat them all," she said, holding them before him graciously.

"But they would spoil my dinner," Mr. Ockleston replied, forgetting his rôle of

a lover, and lapsing quite naïvely into the feelings of an elderly gentleman.

"I have eaten *twice* as many," Mary Martha said, conscious of his lapse, and of all it told. It told all her objections and reasons against him. Her *contemporary* would not have rejected her offering. He would have eaten if he had never dined more—but then there would have been no question of his dinner. She did not immediately withdraw it, but stood tempting him until he took one of the crimson globes in his lean fingers delicately, admired its transparency, and then looked up at her—her little even teeth set to keep in her merriment. "If you are *really* and *truly* afraid of it, chuck it away—*chuck it away*," she said exhortingly, then laid down her green basket, and opened a fresh branch of conversation.

"I am going to St. Croix next week—to St. Croix in Normandy; but I daresay somebody has told you?" Mr. Ockleston had heard of it from Mrs. Sheffield after church.

“Aunt Lena is losing a daughter—Cousin Kate is marrying soon, and I am wanted for a few months.”

Mr. Ockleston cheerfully followed her lead ; said that he was sure she would be a comfort, and useful, and thought that he could show her a sketch or two taken at St. Croix.

“Then you know the place—you have been there? And is it so very pretty and pleasant?” she inquired rather eagerly.

“It stands well. It is set on a hill in the midst of fertile fields. The outlook from the ramparts is smiling and happy because of the signs of industry and habitation spread over the plain.”

“Aunt Lena lives in an old house on the ramparts.”

“I will send you my sketches thereabouts to turn over before you go—or perhaps you will allow me to bring them?”

“Oh, thank you, thank you! I should like it *so* much. It is nice to have an idea of what one is going to.”

"And if some day, by accident, towards the close of the summer, I should come to St. Croix, would you be glad to see me?"

"That I should—that I should, indeed! It is all new—they are all strangers, though they are my nearest relations."

Mary Martha answered from her heart, and Mr. Ockleston's gratitude was so warm, so energetic, that it brought on him a deserved remonstrance—"Please *don't!* It is quite simple and natural that I should be glad to see an old friend who belongs to home when I am a long way off—is it not?"

Mr. Ockleston admitted that it was, and reverted to the gooseberry which he still held. "It is a pity to—to *chuck* it away," he said, and M. M. instinctively made a round O of her mouth, and there was an end of it.

Shortly afterwards they were seen sauntering across the lawn within view of the drawing-room where the sisters awaited the event. But if Mary Martha went slowly,

she returned swiftly. She had escorted Mr. Ockleston to the shrubbery gate, where the flies rallied to the attack on the instant, and there had bidden him a prompt good-by.

" Ah, you traitors—you villains !" cried she, darting in at the French window sooner than she was expected. "*This* was what you meant by 'after to-morrow,' was it ? '*After to-morrow*,' indeed !"

There was no mistaking her air of triumph as she stood confronting them, her hair blown up from her brow in a soft tangle, and her petticoats pinned as Elizabeth had sent her away. They laughed in spite of the gravity of the occasion.

" Tell us, M. M., tell us what you both said," they cried with one voice.

" I don't think I *shall* tell you ! Are you worthy to know ? betraying me into what might have been such a terrible scrape ? But my guardian angel came to the rescue, and pulled me through *with* dignity and

grace. We are to be friends till death ! His proposal of marriage was the aberration of a moment, only an *aberration*, you know, and we are to forget it !”

“Who is telling stories *now* ? I should like to hear *his* account of the matter,” Jane exclaimed disbelievingly.

“You have been crying, M. M. ; you cannot deceive me,” Elizabeth said, with tender reproach.

M. M. put up her hands to her burning cheeks. Indeed, she was greatly excited. “Perhaps I *have* been crying. I am ever so sorry—*ever so sorry* ! I *wish* he was my *contemporary* !”

There was a titter outside, and Kitty Clewer appeared at the French window, full of mischief, with rapid tongue revealing what she had overheard.

“So you wish Mr. Ockleston was your contemporary ? They have just met—Mr. Ockleston and your *contemporary*. Which was best pleas~~ed~~ I don’t know. You should

not tell your secrets at open doors, unless you want them telling again.”

Mary Martha glanced at her enemy, and fled from the room. Elizabeth went after her, and left Kitty to the tender mercies of Jane and Ann. They were not very tender.

“ Kitty,” Jane said, “ you have not the key of our side-door. You lost your road, and arrived at the wrong entrance. Go round and ring the visitors’ bell.”

Kitty laughed, and took the thing by the safe handle. “ Do you mean it ?” she asked.

“ I do mean it,” Jane answered.

Kitty made her exit as she had come, and presently the bell sounded in the hall. But nobody was ushered in. Kitty Clewer was a visitor to whom the family were not at home on Sunday afternoons, though on weekdays their hospitality never failed her.

Mr. Ockleston and Mr. George Marriott had met as Kitty told the story : Mr. Ockleston with a rapt composure about him which George noted, and interpreted to signify

that M. M. had not quenched his flame—which was true, whatever her intentions. George had gone up the road to Thornhill, expectant of he did not exactly know what, perhaps of a chance encounter with some of the family, and an invitation in. Mr. Ockleston asked what brought him there, to which he answered that he was taking a quiet stroll. They walked back to the Green together. Mrs. Holland, in her front garden, watched the two drawing near. The squire's self-complacency was patent in gait and step, but her nephew's air seemed a trifle depressed. They came to the gate, and Mr. Ockleston, who had a quick appreciation for a fine flower that was a novelty, commended a *Malmaison* carnation that the old lady had cherished into the perfection of blooming. She promised him a cutting, or to strike one for him at the right time, and George, standing by with half an ear to their voices, felt the littleness and inèonsequence of things in general as he had never done before.

“What is it, George?” his kind old aunt inquired as Mr. Ockleston moved off.

“I believe that I am feeling the edge of disappointment,” said he, with a rueful smile.

“Not yet, I hope. Have a good courage, dear. Above all, know what you want; be quite, *quite* sure of it.”

That was sound advice, and seasonable. The young man had the natural passion of liberty, and if he was a prisoner had scarcely felt his bonds. He had said in his vanity that there was time enough yet, and he would not hurry his wooing. That was when M. M. was free, but Mr. Ockleston’s attempt to bespeak her had opened his eyes to the fact that she was rated as a prize, and would have to be striven for. George had flirted and played with other girls as pretty and good, no doubt, but not one had ever touched him so nearly and piquantly. He liked M. M.’s impromptus and her little unconscious confessions. M. M. had a delicate blush for him, and a shy look that was not common

to all her acquaintance. She presented her shoulder sometimes when they talked, and sometimes she turned her back, and then came round again with a flash of contradiction, or a gentle token of assent, and all as if she could not help it. Mrs. Holland's parlour was not a wide stage, but it was wide enough for the development of the comedy scenes of a true love. Since their last meeting on that stage M. M. had listened often in her heart to the echo of his wooing: "*Mary Martha*," and he had thrilled as often to her sweet retort: "Your servant, Sir!" A few more such meetings, and such words, and they would have told their mutual love, and there would have been no other tale to tell.

CHAPTER VI.

ST. CROIX.

“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”—ST. PAUL.

MR. GEORGE MARRIOTT attended church with Mrs. Holland in the evening, that he might have one more sight of Miss Brooke. But her place was empty, and on coming out he had to make all haste to the railway, not to lose his train. During the week Mr. Ockleston exhibited his sketches of St. Croix, and lectured at some length to his dear young friend on the place in history that the town obscurely occupied. Mary Martha behaved very well considering, and looked forward to next Saturday.

It came, and brought her nothing. Mrs. Holland mentioned, as by the way, that

George had gone to spend his Sunday at Stockleigh.

"Then I shall not see him again before I go to St. Croix?" Mary Martha murmured.

"He will not forget you," replied the old lady; for M. M. sounded like a child, pettishly surprised and hurt that any one she cared for should have gone without a solemn good-by.

On Wednesday it was good-by to everybody for the little cousin herself. The dinner-party for which the *ménu* cards were etched took place the night before, when the musing daddy-longlegs was assigned to her, and a swallow on the wing to Mr. Ockleston. He was seen to smile at it, and put it safely in his waistcoat-pocket. M. M. was happy, as in an atmosphere of blessing: she was going, but she would return again. The kind rector, Dr. Bloxham, and his dear wife, had a book for her to read a little each day, and everybody had some word or wish that was pleasant to remember. They all knew,

or conjectured, what her case was, and said that it would be good for her to see a little more of the world. Mr. Ockleston said so with the rest, and was perfectly satisfied that the event would be in his favour.

On that Wednesday morning, while M. M. was flying express to London between her Uncle John and Elizabeth, George Marriott was writing a letter of the first importance to them both. George had gone home to Stockleigh to take counsel, and had been bidden to trust and please himself only in the choice of a partner for life. This letter, then, was to inform Mary Martha that his choice had fallen upon her. He wrote it in great hopes. He was not able to believe that M. M. had consented yet to any binding engagement; but he said nothing of that—nothing of anybody but themselves. He addressed it with careful legibility to “Miss Brooke, No. 17, Rue des Petits-Fossés, St. Croix, Seine Inferieure, France,” and posted it himself. It crossed the Channel in

the mail-bag safely, and reached St. Croix on Thursday evening. There was no evening distribution of letters at St. Croix, but on Friday morning it would have been duly delivered but for the accident that at St. Croix there was no Rue des Petits-Fossés, and consequently no No. 17. Mrs. Holland had furnished George with the address. It was a blunder; one of these innocent, inexplicable blunders that keep up the primitive belief of a fate in things. Official sagacity could make nothing of it save what was written. But the English were in shoals throughout the province at this season, and the postmaster stuck the letter in the rack amongst others that had missed their way, or were to be left till called for.

Mary Martha arrived at St. Croix on that same Thursday evening. Her arrival was rather confused; Mr. Sheffield and Elizabeth had settled to drop her at the station, and go straight on to Paris, but nobody was there to receive her. In the

minute's halt M. M. jumped out and looked round for her welcome, but no welcome was there; and Elizabeth's last glimpse of her was standing by herself in the same spot, and the platform stretching long sunny and blank behind her. M. M. watched the train disappear in the distance, and then marched off to inspect her luggage. That was all right, but to be alone was not all right. However, it brought into evidence her moderation and strength of mind. She had patience, and kept an eye on the street until she saw a lady hurrying up, and then she hurried to meet her.

"Ah, you dear child, what you must have thought of us, not being here to receive you!" cried the poor lady, even before they embraced.

"Not at all—don't mention it," said M. M., clearly and pleasantly, and beamed at her own image in her Aunt Lena's face.

Then there was incoherent explanation about a little carriage that was to have come,

and had not come, and so had occasioned delay. "Cannot we walk?" said M. M.; but it seemed there had been a second arrangement, involving the conveyance of the luggage, and which ought to be waited for, lest that also failed.

It had to be waited for a considerable while. Mrs. Devine was distressed but silent, except when she was apologetic. M. M., partly to her own surprise, was cheerful, and even gay, deeply relieved, if the truth must be told, at feeling safe under Aunt Lena's wing. As they were still waiting, a telegram was flashed from the next station forward, inquiring if the young lady who got out at St. Croix had been met by her relative. M. M., quick as a bird, dictated, "*Oui, Oui, Oui,*" to be flashed back for answer—joyfully expressive of her satisfaction in being able to quell the anxiety of the two who had gone on; but to her Aunt Lena a dismaying, further painful consequence of her tardiness.

"It is nothing. Telegrams are always flying about at home," Mary Martha said to comfort her.

"You have come to a very different country, dear," Mrs. Devine replied, and moved away to see if that second arrangement might be near taking effect. It was not in sight yet. The local manager proffered his assistance to the lady at this point. It was declined, however; she would prefer to wait.

"It will be cooler by-and-by, and we must walk now," she said to M. M., softly. She might have added another reason—that the man would expect money for his trouble—but her lips stumbled at it.

The station itself did not afford any prospect. The line ran between embankments, and looking towards the town the view was of a steep street shut in with tall houses on either hand. A church bell tinkled not far off, and there were other noises—voices, but all against a back-

ground of grave tranquillity. M. M. had her thoughts.

When that other arrangement did appear it was a boy with a shallow wooden tray on wheels, and a donkey. The luggage was lifted in, and the humble procession started, the two ladies in the rear with an eye to the property. Perhaps it was best so, some of it being light, and easily conveyable. The road was long ; up that steep street first, then to the left up another street, which led into the *Grande Place*, where a few people were strolling about, and the sky was red with sunset reflections ; across the *Place*, and round a corner, which was the corner of the church, into a street very narrow and sinuous, and at this hour almost in the dark. Little shops of all sorts of wares bordered it on either side, till it made a bold curve on the right hand, and widened into a space where were the appliances for a market of country produce. Beyond that it contracted again ; but now the shops were only on one side ; on the other

were iron gratings and low-browed doors, deep set in blackened stone walls, and looking upwards white window-frames and shutters and balconies, hung out sometimes with clothes to dry, and sometimes with flowers. At one of these doors the boy stopped to unload.

"We must have made nearly the circuit of St. Croix?" Mary Martha said, thankfulness in her voice that here was the end of her journey.

"I hope that you are not feeling over-tired, dear—but it is my fault," Mrs. Devine answered, with renewed self reproach.

The door opened, and the luggage was carried down two or three steps into a lobby dimly lighted from the street. Then another door opened into a room flooded with the western after-glow, and a young figure stood up against it, like a figure in a picture. M. M. was aware of another figure lying on a couch, which was drawn out from the wall, and turned toward the window.

"These are your cousins, dear—this is Kate," said their mother, putting M. M.'s hand in the hand of her elder daughter, who touched her on both cheeks with her lips conventionally. "And this is my pretty, sweet Marguerite ; as she cannot come to you, you must come to her." M. M. came, and a little white form half raised itself on the couch, and drew down her face tenderly, so tenderly : "Sois la bien-venue," said she, and the stranger felt tears warmer than kisses on her cheeks. This one was glad of her—glad from her very heart of hearts.

There was the scent of flowers blown in with the balmy air from out of doors, and the perfume of fruit on a table in a recess.

"Now then, *dîner*," said Kate, in a voice not unkind but peremptory, as reminding everybody of duty and pleasure waiting.

"One little moment, and we are ready," responded the mother, catching Kate's tone like an echo ; and she motioned Mary Martha

quickly to pass before her into a tiny cabinet adjoining, where there was a narrow bed and candle-light, and very scanty furniture besides. "This is the best we can do for you till Kate goes. When Kate goes you will have her room," she whispered, confidentially.

"Oh, it is very nice—I understand—I like it," M. M. answered in the same key. Aunt Lena took her in her arms with a long, silent strain. Those two had fallen in love at first sight.

Kate looked in, and offered to do anything for her cousin. ~

"My large travelling-bag then, please. It has all in it that I shall want to-night," M. M. said, cordially accepting her services.

Mrs. Devine left them together; indeed, there was no room for her when Kate introduced the bag, and prepared to open it.

"You have a talent for order," she remarked, surveying the interior, which was

truly wonderful for convenience and comprehensiveness.

"Praise Elizabeth for that; *she* packed it. But I *am* neat—I appreciate method," M. M. said, taking her own due also.

"Who is Elizabeth?" asked the other, her hands and eyes busy in the bag.

"Elizabeth Sheffield, the eldest of my Thornhill cousins. A most dear soul."

"There is everything here that one could desire," Kate observed, with an inward sigh of longing, as she brought out each article, and examined it with swift scrutiny. "*Everything*—even ivory brushes engraved with your monogram—elegant, *elegantissime*! It is a beautiful bag—a *gift* possibly?"

"Oh, yes, all that I possess is a gift. I have nothing of my own," M. M. avowed, struck by Kate's emphasis on the word *gift*.

"It holds a dress. This is pure China silk——"

"Yes. You see it does not tumble a dress

to roll it up *so*. You might think it would, but it does not," and M. M. showed the manner of rolling by the same action with which she shook out the soft folds to put it on in exchange for her travelling costume of brown beige.

She was ready now, and posed and turned herself an instant in front of a mirror on the wall; then gave her hand to Kate to return to the *salon*.

Mrs. Devine was sitting on the couch at Marguerite's feet, and rose to take her place at the table in the recess, as the two girls appeared. All was *en fête* for the young guest. Aunt Lena had tied a lace kerchief loosely round her throat, and Kate had put on over her grey linen dress a necklace of amber beads. The subdued lamplight showed the table ornamented with an antique China dish, in many pieces, curiously fitted together, the centrepiece heaped up with summer fruits, and the encircling parts filled with biscuits and sweetmeats. Mrs. Devine

mentioned, before anything else, that this remarkable dish belonged to the people of the house—excellent people—and also the old silver covers which she believed to be of very high value. Mary Martha ate her soup and cutlet with youthful appetite, and admired what her attention was drawn to.

Marguerite had a cup of cocoa brought to her where she lay, and her voice was not heard. Kate was the presiding genius of the family. Whether Kate was beautiful M. M. found it not easy to determine, but she was sure that she had never seen any one in the least like her. She resembled her mother less than M. M. did—indeed, she resembled her not at all, and constantly called herself her father's child.

In that household M. M. discovered soon that there was no current coin in the form of small talk; and this evening, what with delays, waitings, and agitations, perhaps they began to feel tired early. Mrs. Devine's wan smiles confessed it. Only Kate was

alert. There was a question in her face from the beginning of dinner, but she reserved it to the end, when coffee was brought and the door shut. Her mother perceived her purpose, and made an attempt to arrest it.

"Don't begin to-night, Kate! It is late now, and the dear child must be ready for her bed after her journey," she said with energy, and laid a hand on Kate's arm to stop her.

Kate was standing, holding her cup to her lips, and looking over it intently at her English cousin. Mary Martha knew that she was being inspected, and looked back at Kate with amused simplicity.

"Is it of vital importance?" she said, showing that she was both interested and amused.

"We are two poor girls, and it concerns *money*," Kate answered. "By law it would all come to *you*, but I should think you would share it? I should *think* you would share it?"

M. M. made no response for a minute. Finally she said, with a sober little air of taking thought, "I have heard nothing of it——"

"It is a long story, and you could make nothing of it unless it were told at length," Mrs. Devine interposed; and M. M. obeyed her leading.

"Then never mind it to-night, Kate. I could not fix my attention on a long story. I have come to a wedding—tell me about that instead," she said.

Mary Martha had no ideas but of *happy* weddings. Kate took a photograph from a miniature easel, and gave it to her without a word. To examine it, M. M. went aside to the lamp, partly prepared for a disenchanting revelation. The photograph represented a man well advanced in life, with an immense head and a very ugly face—an intellectual face, however, and not ill-natured.

"Monsieur de Marcel is a famous *savant*.

I am proud to have won his affections," Kate said grandly; and M. M. answered with awe, "I suppose so."

She turned round, and was conscious of regarding her cousin with quite other impressions. A glow of emotion had transfigured Kate. She was, indeed, excessively handsome. Her eyes were too close together, and the lower half of her face was heavy; but her colouring was rich and soft, and her mien full of distinction.

"Unfortunately Monsieur de Marcel is poor, and I detest poverty," she went on with expressive action. "Monsieur de Marcel refuses to seek an appointment in Paris, and my heart is set on Paris. The reputation of Monsieur de Marcel is world-wide, but better than society, than courts, than honours, he loves his old château down there by the river, its cellars populated with frogs, and its *grenier* with rats."

"The apartments on the first and second floors are then more comfortable?" said

M. M., clipping the edge of Kate's sarcasm.

"Mamma promises that I shall be well there. We shall see. We shall see."

"You make me very unhappy, Kate. Monsieur de Marcel is your own choice. If you repent, there is even yet time," her mother said piteously.

"We are to be married on Tuesday. Monsieur de Marcel makes no profession of faith. We shall not therefore be married in church."

Mary Martha had heard of civil marriages, but her knowledge was too indefinite to encourage her to speak, though Kate had paused as if expecting her to speak. Silence could do no harm, and M. M. was silent.

"We shall travel for several months—the how and the where will arrange itself. My *dot* amounts to twelve hundred francs a year; losing me and it will leave poor mamma so much the poorer. When that money comes

to you, my cousin, remember your father's blood is ours also, and share it with us."

"Have you done, Kate? Then let us retire to rest—those who *can* rest," said Mrs. Devine, and Mary Martha made the first move.

CHAPTER VII.

GIFTS AND GRACES.

“Gently to hear, kindly to judge.”—SHAKSPEARE.

IN the fresh morning everything appears fresh, novel, hopeful, delightful. The sun had not long risen when Mary Martha awoke and arose, and drew back the curtain to see what manner of visage this new country had to show her. All was still yet except the small frequent noises of birds in the trees, and in the crannies of the old walls and roofs. There was a pearly pinkness over the sky, and a tender haze mixed of dawn and vapour over the valley. At her feet was the brick floor of a little terrace from which went down into a garden a short flight of brick steps, just opposite. Her window was, in fact, a

door opening on the terrace, and her tiny cabinet was customarily a tiny *salle-à-manger*.

No one in the house was stirring for another hour, and by that time M. M. had written two letters, the first to all friends at Thornhill, and the second to Elizabeth in Paris. And she had emptied that wonderful bag. She was going to give it to Kate for her travelling-bag when she was married. M. M. had brought her presents from England, very nice to give and to have, but none of them quite so nice or so useful as that beautiful bag. And when she had emptied it she put back all the articles that Kate had covetously eyed, unless it were such as bore her own monogram. She did not think of Kate as covetous, but only as naturally wishing for a bag that she perceived to be desirable on a journey. Being at the end of her journeying for the moment, M. M. could do without it, and it was no effort, but a pleasure, to think of giving it away.

Towards six o'clock came forth in blouse and straw hat an old man, who went stealthily about his morning task of sweeping and watering the bricks. Thence he descended to the garden, and was visible amongst the trees and bushes, hard at work for a good while. The sun was growing hot when he mounted the steps again, carrying a large shallow punnet of roses, which he set down in a cool spot of shade, and then went his way. A few minutes after he had vanished, Kate, in a short gown and with a cotton handkerchief knotted round her head, emerged from the *salon*, and took the punnet in, stopping an instant to smell the roses and give them a touch of re-arrangement.

"She is putting the *salon* in order," M. M. said to herself; and, indeed, this was Kate's daily office, to put in order and dust the *salon* before the others appeared. "I shall do the same when she goes," M. M. determined; and she thought that when she gave Kate the bag, that would be her oppor-

tunity to ask to be taught the way, to get accustomed to it before Tuesday.

The family met upon the terrace. The breakfast-table was set there, and Kate was serving-maid. Marguerite's reclining chair had been wheeled out, and if the day continued warm and windless there she would lie till evening, contented as any of them. The terrace was not ten paces between the wings of the house, but it made a pretty out-of-doors parlour. It was roofed over half its breadth, and the posts of the roof were twined with roses and jessamine, which formed also a mingled wreath along the front. Where Marguerite's chair was placed a stout striped linen curtain hung, which she could draw and undraw at pleasure, as there was too much sun, or too much air, and when Mary Martha saw her established in that safe and sheltered corner, with the summer clouds and soft far-away folds of the valley to rest her eyes upon, she declared that she had never seen

anything so luxuriously, so sentimentally cosy. Marguerite laughed.

“You hear, mamma—our cousin would not think it unbearable,” she said; for it was a loving quarrel between Marguerite and her mother, whether her state of affliction was to be repined at.

The mother suffered most. Marguerite had a great spirit. She had grown to her life, and made much of it. No one was happier. That was written in her face. Pain was pain to her, but it was not grief or misery. She had many consolations, friends, kind people who played chess with her, birds that sang to her, flowers that blew her sweet odours, a few books that she knew by heart, and which yet told her new thoughts at each reading.

The one sad figure of the group was Mrs. Devine. She was tired already, because her strength was low, and her mind worn with care. Mary Martha's heart ached with only looking at her. What anxiety was

revealed in her sleepless eyes, what privations in her hollow cheek and too spare frame! Nothing but her hair was young. That was wavy, abundant, and beautiful as Mary Martha's own. If M. M. had a hard life, at forty, she might be a copy of what her Aunt Lena was now.

Kate's unlikeness to her mother was very striking. She was full of health and vigour, and her face rivalled the freshness of the dewy roses. But her common dress, the covering on her head, were unsightly, and she was either negligent or indifferent—possibly both; it was her habit of a morning—a part of the poverty she detested. She brought the *café au lait* which she had made, she stood and poured it out, then spread butter on a roll for Marguerite, and took a hunch of coarser bread on her own account.

"I have been up a long while," she said to her English cousin, who said, so had she, and held out her plate for another hunch, nobody gainsaying her. It was good, sweet bread,

and Mrs. Devine ate it also ; but there were rolls if M. M. pleased. Nothing was attempted to be hidden from her, and M. M. did not please. She paid her footing with cheerfulness, and entered straightway into the narrow bounds of their limited existence.

It was a happy thought of Kate's to set the breakfast on the terrace. It was quite simple, but the beauty of the morning and the scene kept up the feeling of being on holiday. Marguerite tried to make their cousin see where Monsieur de Marcel's château was *not* to be seen for the shoulder of a hill, except the blue wood smoke from his chimneys ; but in the winter they could see the chimneys themselves, and even a part of the roof.

" Kate was never tired of looking for them till lately. Since they are so soon to be *her* chimneys, she pretends to find them less picturesque," said her sister ; but Kate blushed a confession that those chimneys were not quite without interest for her.

The mother gazed wistfully into the sunny distance: "It is a blessing to be safe and sure under a roof of one's own. I could wish that this little roof were as sure to Marguerite and me as Kate's chimneys to her," she said, and her poor face quivered.

"The birds build new nests every year, mamma," Marguerite answered.

"You have beautiful thoughts, my child."

Kate moved two books nearer to her mother's hand. Mrs. Devine had brought up her children Christianly. They read the Morning Psalms and Lessons for the day, and a portion of the prayers, and then they sang—tuneful sweet voices they had all, and the music lifted their hearts for a little moment above the atmosphere of clouds and care. Mary Martha had tears in her eyes with the strange surprise and pathos of it.

A brief silent meditation, and they dropped down on common life again. Kate proposed to show her cousin their domain. The terrace was theirs, and brought all its parts

into communication. The *salon*, the dining-room, and the kitchen opened upon it. And they might call the garden theirs, so far as walking in it and having the view of it went; but it was not theirs to cultivate or cull from. Monsieur Tirard, the proprietor of the house, did that, and sold them of its produce; and in the time of roses he cut every morning the blossoms that were full blown, which answered two good purposes—saving the litter of scattered petals, and being a little grace to his tenant. The fresh roses every morning made of Mrs. Devine's *salon* a bower of refined sweetness.

“We will not go down the steps now; come into my kitchen—my kitchen is my pride,” Kate said, and conducted Mary Martha along the terrace and through a two-fold door, half of glass, into the smallest quarters perhaps ever called by that name. It was provided with a cooking stove, and brass pots and pans gleamed from wall and shelf. “No one can tell how ancient the

house is ; the walls are enormously thick and strong ; you may judge by the depth of these queer cupboards constructed in them ; but they are miracles of convenience. You have to stand upon this stool to reach to the far end ; we do not often require what is put away there, fortunately." As Kate talked she went and came, and cleared the breakfast-table, putting neatly together in one of the miraculous cupboards the cups and plates, and the food in another, which was furnished with a minute grating. "Monsieur Tirard is very obliging, and madame, his wife, is also accommodating ; but then mamma is a tenant such as there are few. We have found it more prudent to have one *bonne*, whose services suffice both families. Abigail is a clever creature, though naturally she is not enough for everything. I have my little province, as you see."

"Yes, let me succeed you, cousin Kate. Bequeath me your feather-brush and duster,

and I will resign to you my travelling bag," said M. M.

"It is what I wish, that you should succeed me, and my feather-brush and duster you shall inherit; but the bag, may you give it to me?"

"Surely. It *was* mine: it *is* yours, if you will have it." M. M. had a shyness in giving which Kate had not in accepting the gift.

"Let us go and examine it," said she, and led the way with a curious elation.

The kitchen had a second door into a gloomy close place where Mary Martha's larger luggage had been temporarily deposited, and she recollected the other presents she had brought.

"That big box may stand by as it is until colder weather, but this one I must open; it has in it the presents Thornhill has sent for you, Kate," said she, stopping at it.

Kate tried to lift the box: "It is too heavy.

Abigail is not yet gone, together we can carry it into the daylight."

Abigail had just done sweeping and garnishing the guest's little apartment. She was a fine, tall woman, abrupt but good-humoured. She made nothing of lifting the box, and bringing it to the window.

M. M. knelt down upon the floor, and herself undid the buckles and straps, while Kate was joyfully busy appropriating the bag, and all she had put into it. The ivory brushes and two silver-mounted bottles M. M. had left on the table under the mirror, and Kate, touching them with her finger-tips lightly, muttered, "Ah, yes, they—*they* are marked, ineffaceably marked."

Mary Martha's face began to burn. She was on her knees, and stooping to lift the lid of the box. She did not look up or speak, though evidently she heard the muttered regret.

It has been said that a gift is the measure of the giver's feeling for the person to whom

it is offered. None of them at Thornhill had seen Katherine Devine. They knew that she was a poor young lady who had grown up in a French country-town, and that her mother could not have subsisted without the allowance made to her by Thornhill in respect of the family connexion. They knew further that she was marrying a middle-aged man of science, residing in the same neighbourhood, and the girls had taxed their purses for presents with only these circumstances in view. They were not very much, and M. M. had, it seemed, a diffidence in producing them. But to keep Kate waiting would not increase their value, and one after the other they were brought forth : a *sachet* worked with gold thread on purple satin and lined with white, a small table-cloth of olive velvet with a border of jessamine, and a pair of afternoon tea-cloths of rich damask with corners of wild roses and daisies. The donors had attached cards with their good wishes to the bride.

"The girls worked them themselves—they thought you would be pleased. They're lovely, *I* think," M. M. said, the truth making her bold.

Kate did not know the use of the damask tea-cloths worked with coloured silks, and Mary Martha had to explain the modern institution of five-o'clock tea, as it was celebrated at Thornhill on high days and holidays. Kate listened with a half-attention—M. M. was resting from her labours: "Oh, my present!" cried she, with sudden liveliness of voice and gesture, as she prepared to dive deeper into the box: "*My present!* guess what it is, Kate. You shall not see it, not the least little bit of it, till you have given three guesses! Say what you would *like*, and *guess*." M. M.'s actual present was a cushion, also of her own embroidering, but Kate's thanks for home-made contributions were so extremely faint that, unless to throw it at her, M. M. did not mean to bring out her cushion.

Kate had no difficulty in saying what she would like. "If you ask me that," said she, "I should like ornaments to wear. I have none, absolutely *none*, and mamma has none to give me. I don't believe any lady was ever stripped so bare as poor mamma."

M. M.'s countenance expanded radiantly: "I'm a witch! I am happy to say that I can gratify you;" she had fallen on her innocent acting, and was acting very successfully. Kate saw that she was different from herself, that her vivacity was exaggerated, but it did not occur to her that she was playing a part for the occasion, as little real as a part in a comedy.

M. M. was rich in ornaments. She had two suits in cases that might have left the jeweller's only yesterday, and she had many things besides in old cases that had come with her from Bombay. Elizabeth Sheffield had gathered them all up into one Indian box, and had endeavoured to impress upon her that, though they might be anti-

quoted and not appropriate for a girl to wear, they were undeniably valuable, and ought to be kept with safety. The newer ornaments were birthday gifts from the three girls and their father and mother united. The earlier suit was of Scotch pebbles, fine moss agates, charmingly set as bees and butterflies; the other, for evening dress, was of pink coral with brilliant sparks. Nothing could be further from the imagination of the givers than that the little cousin might be tempted to part with them, yet to that conclusion she had all but come. She was on the point of laying the two cases down before Kate, and like any gamester, bidding her guess again, when that watchful Providence, who interferes to save us from our worst blunders, flashed upon her recollection their dedicatory inscriptions to herself. At the same instant she was reminded of another case, larger, and containing a much more noble *parure*, which she had rejected from amongst her treasures, but which Elizabeth had thrust into a corner

amongst her soft clothing. It had come from the *Weathercock*, not by direct way of a lover's offering, but as the ladies' first prize at last summer's tennis tournament. Mary Martha hated it, and this opportunity of being handsomely rid of it, and doing her cousin Kate a splendid charity, she accepted as a special dispensation of help in time of need.

"*There*," she said, and placed it in Kate's hand with the air of a beneficent fairy god-mother.

Kate flushed and paled, laughed and trembled as she opened it. Round its circumference was coiled a pliant gold necklet with a locket of dark blue enamel attached, on the back of which was a star in pearls. There was a bracelet to match, and two small pendants for the ears. "Now I am pleased—I am pleased, indeed," said the happy recipient, her voice hushed with joy.

M. M. showed her how, by detaching the locket, it might be worn as a brooch, and the next thing was to mount to Kate's

room, where the accessories for trying on these glories were more to the purpose. It was by a brick stair they mounted, and Mary Martha's sense of incongruities was mightily stirred. But the tears were as near to her eyes as the laugh to her lips. Kate, in her shapeless gown and ugly head-gear, kissing—*kissing* those insensible toys, was the most comical, pathetic sight!

“Don't laugh at me! Ah, if you *knew*!” Kate said, and sighed with a world of meaning. She plucked off the handkerchief, and all her beautiful hair fell down in a shining mass.

M. M. loved her better for that appeal than for anything she had heard from her yet, and decided that she should have the cushion.

By-and-by Kate stood up, tall and graceful, in a white cashmere gown that fitted her like a glove, the necklet, the locket, the bracelet, the ear-drops, all on. She wore her hair smoothed behind her ears, and twisted into a

knot low in the neck. Clearly, she was not one of those women who take an infinite deal of pains to make themselves displeasing.

M. M. had her reward. That *parure* was precisely what Kate needed to perfect her dress: "My wedding dress," she mentioned, with a blush at her own face in the glass, and then she looked over her shoulder at the long-trained skirt. "Monsieur de Marcel approves it."

"He would be very bad to please if he did *not*," said M. M., forming a strong opinion.

"Call mamma! *Mamma!*" and Kate herself called, making her voice ring down the stairs.

Mrs. Devine came slowly up, appearing like a shabby brown ghost in the sunshine and whiteness of the bride's presence. When she was bidden to "*See!*" and Kate pointed exultantly to her ornaments, she looked and smiled—a true, motherly smile of sympathy and satisfaction.

"These are our English cousin's gift to me," Kate announced, as became the munificence of the gift.

Then M. M. judged it expedient to declare how it happened, that, possessing nothing of her own, she had it in her power to offer such a gift. Mrs. Devine quite understood, and Kate did not heed; it was all one to her how the *parure* was first acquired, since it had become hers now *sans* contradiction.

Then her modest *trousseau* was displayed to Mary Martha, who considered it all that was necessary, and much more sensible than having "a lot of dresses and things," which it would be "simply impossible" to wear out before they were grown old-fashioned, or too small.

"I have only been bridesmaid once—it was to an old schoolfellow, who had dozens and dozens of gloves provided for her—*beautiful gloves*," she related anecdotically. "Well, it happened that after she was married she

became stouter—*much* stouter—and her gloves would not button, they would not come on ; in fact, they were of no use to her ; so she sent them to me, just writing : ‘Gloves are like kisses, have these of mine ? and it will be years—*years* before I shall need to buy any.’ But what *waste* for *her* !”

Kate, in Blackchester parlance, was certainly a rather “*having*” young lady. She held out her hand, a remarkably fine hand, a candidate for some of those gloves, but it was quite two sizes larger than M. M.’s, which was sixes. She informed Mary Martha, however, that if they were really best Paris gloves, she could get them exchanged, and in conclusion several pairs underwent a second and a third transfer, which saved them from being, perhaps, specked and spotted with too long lying by.

Mrs. Devine had her occupation below, and left the girls to themselves again. M. M. had been thinking about her, and

when she was out of hearing, began to say : "Dear Aunt Lena, how pallid she is, how thin and worn ! and yet not ill, *not positively ill*. I wish I could give her a bit of good luck ! I believe it would do her all the *good* in the world !"

"Mamma is never ill," Kate replied. "I don't remember that mamma was ever unequal to what she had to do. She allows no one to touch Marguerite but herself. Marguerite is her sole charge ; a heavy charge enough often. What poor mamma requires is more nourishment, nothing else—just better food, more nourishment." She spoke without emotion, not to say without feeling, stating an acknowledged fact that was not singular, and that could not, in their circumstances, be otherwise.

Mary Martha found herself incapable of another word after that, and slipped away downstairs to her unpacking again, but at *déjeuner* she saw how it was. Aunt Lena took always the least nice pieces to give

Marguerite the best, and even Kate and herself. No doubt it had been so since the children were little, and did not understand, for they took no notice. M. M. copied them, but she could hardly bear it, and yet, if she had reflected, she must have known that it is one of the commonest things in life when mothers deprive themselves for their children.

They were on the terrace again, a timely cloud veiling the mid-day sun. Kate was becomingly dressed in the grey linen gown that she had worn the previous evening, with the further advantage of a happy countenance and a quiet manner. M. M. did not know, could not know, unless by intuition, what a boon she had bestowed upon her in those trinkets. Marguerite expressed it in part when she congratulated her sister.

“If anybody comes to spy out the nakedness of the land to-morrow, they will go away disappointed,” said she.

The cushion, the *sachet*, the embroidered velvet and damask, were all heaped up about her couch, and Kate was still adorned with her jewels.

When Kate was pleased everybody was happy. It was long since Mrs. Devine had learnt to be glad in the present moment, and to leave the trouble that was not come out of her calculations. This marriage that was to take place on Tuesday had not been of her seeking, but she believed that when Kate bent her mind to the unalterable conditions of marriage, she would feel safe and satisfied, though Monsieur de Marcel was not rich, and refused to seek preferment. She was anxious now that it should be over; the betrothal was a year old, and Kate was restive and unsettled in temper more of late than ever. She had grown worse from the time there was news of that *money*.

Again, now on the terrace, *déjeuner* being finished, she had a manifest impatience to speak of it. But Mary Martha did not

want to hear the story, not at this time or in this manner. Her acquaintance with the family history was very imperfect, but she had heard that it contained tragical episodes, and her Aunt Lena's face was full of the shadow of old sorrows, while Kate pressed on to tell it. She put up a shield of defence.

"I am so constituted, Kate, that I can only attend properly to one thing at once. Did not you say that Monsieur de Marcel and his mother and sister were to call this afternoon? Let me enjoy the pleasures of anticipation."

"There is time for both. They will not appear till past four o'clock. I wish you would at least say what is your *principle*. It is our great-uncle, our grandfather Brooke's eldest brother, I am talking of; Mr. Brooke, of Harden Tower. Nobody really knows, unless it be his lawyer, what sort of will he has made. Mamma is certain that he will leave nothing to any one of *our* name, and besides ourselves he has only

you. We are as near, but you are a Brooke. If he should make you his heiress, how would you act?"

"Is the old man, our great-uncle, still alive?" M. M. inquired, not remembering to have heard before that she had any great-uncle.

"Of course he is. If he were dead we should know what he has done."

"It is weary work waiting for dead men's shoes, Kate! I would rather not engage in it."

"That is not what I am asking. It is possible that the property may be so settled that if anything happened to you——"

M. M. was listening with a sleepy face, but her eyes opened wide at this awful speculation, enunciated as if it were the next thing coming, and quite indifferent to her. She sat up and gave a little cheerful nod, the significance of which was well understood at Thornhill, and said: "There

will nothing happen to *me*, Kate, to open the succession to *you* ! I've had my fortune told. I am to marry and see my children's children ! A sweet gentleman, but red hair was predicted ; perhaps it will be chestnut-red. That is my favourite colour."

Kate was teased and vexed by this trifling. Her mother saw the menace of a tempestuous outbreak. Marguerite saw it too, but dreaded it less. After a storm the air was clearer for awhile ; but it was prudent to avert it this afternoon, and she said wisely : " Our cousin will not be drawn into any rash vows, Kate ; but from what she does we may be sure that she will never see any of us have need, and shut up her compassion against us."

" No, Kate ! I would share my last shilling with you—if it were a question of last shillings. And if it fall out that I am rich and you are all poor, I'll adopt Aunt Lena and Marguerite for my mother and

sister. As for you—you are adopted—I'll not meddle with *you* !”

This was plain-speaking, and warmth and heart were in it ; but Kate's measure of right and justice went far beyond what M. M. pledged herself to do. After a few minutes she began to move, carrying away the plates and remains of *déjeuner* as she had done after early breakfast. M. M. was rising to help her, but she waved her back with a forbidding “No,” and M. M. quietly sat down again. She was not disposed to exaggerate and make a trouble of Kate's perversities. There appeared a quality of goodness and even greatness in her. She was young and beautiful, and she detested poverty ; yet she was going to give herself to wife to a poor man of twice her years, because she was proud of his affection and she loved him. When a girl loves the best things her foibles are likely to wither away and die in that purer light.

M. M. was in sympathy with her, and seemed to hear again her touching, keen remonstrance: "Ah, if you *knew!*" comprehending so much that she herself, perhaps, never could know.

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUIET INTERLUDE.

“Generous as brave,
Affection, kindness, the sweet offices
Of love and duty, were to her as needful
As her daily bread.” ROGERS.

BETWEEN four and five o'clock the visit of Mons. de Marcel and the ladies of his family was paid. Kate had recovered her complacency, and wore that blush which made her grey linen, or any other dress, of minor importance. She had her cousin's gift to show, and it was best shown in the way it must be worn. Mons. de Marcel had no passion for vanities, but he was glad of what gratified his beautiful Katherine. Mary Martha did not know why he should be so ugly in his photograph, for his countenance was delightful as he looked at Kate, and

talked of her necklet—there was so much in it of happy, self-forgetting sympathy, such as child-lovers feel towards a dear child, when it is shy and its little heart bubbling over with joy. Kate was a different person with him, *better*, in a natural subjection to her superior : Mons. de Marcel was, at least, twice her age, forty or forty-two, probably, and a good deal weather-worn.

His mother and sister, who lived with him at the château, and were to continue under one roof with his young wife, had not sought the match any more than Mrs. Devine. How should they ? The girl belonged to the tribes of poor English who take refuge in foreign cities when they are driven from their own country. She was a heretic, moreover, and they had to abandon the secretly cherished hope that their son and brother would wed with a believing wife, under whose influence he might be brought back to the old paths, and reconciled with the Church. And Kate's fortune was trivial ; though that was of less

consequence if she had not the passion of expense. Mons. de Marcel had been invited to look elsewhere, but he had chosen Katherine, and when Katherine had acceded to his request there was no more to be said. A famous *savant*, she called him. He was a naturalist—the liveliest, simplest character in his home, and amongst the creatures that he had assembled about it. Kate knew that he was famous, but she did not know how famous. To be poor dims reputation in provincial minds, and she had never seen him through the eyes of people who would have recognized by their homage the height at which he stood.

Of Madame de Marcel, Kate was a little in awe. That lady was noble of her nature, sincere, good, touched with an infirmity or two without which she would have been intolerable. Her daughter was like her on a smaller plan; she had more foibles and more prejudices, and being shallower they were near the surface. Kate was a little afraid of

the mother, but of the daughter she said that she was full of eyes behind and before, and that if mischief came of the double household Jeanne de Marcel would be the one to blame. Katherine had objected to this double household, but there was no other way, no means, no money to make two households; and Mons. de Marcel had no wish to exile his mother and sister. They were an interdependent trio, closely associated in habits and pursuits, and he did not see how their lives could go on apart. All that was settled now. Katherine had listened to reason; she had yielded to the custom of the country, and consented to take his family for her own. The contract was ready, the preliminaries were in order, the marriage was to be on Tuesday.

And on Tuesday it was, a marriage strictly according to law, but shorn of grace and ceremonial. Mary Martha wrote no account of it to her correspondents, and did not incline to talk of it after. She had missed the

church, the prayers and the blessing, and felt inwardly surprised that Aunt Lena could have agreed to dispense with a religious service. Aunt Lena had learnt to dispense with most religious privileges at St. Croix. There was no colony of English there, and no chaplain. Nor were there any French Protestants to whose temple she might have taken her children. They kept their Sundays at home, and sometimes in the twilight went up to the great church in the midst of the town.

The marriage was over, and a quiet peace seemed to fall upon the poor, tired mother. She folded her hands and rested, and Marguerite was as happy as in heaven. M. M. slipped silently into Kate's empty place, rose early, wafted the feather-brush, piled the plates, cut the bread and butter. It was all as easy as dreaming: the new life was soon as familiar as the old. She made friends with Mons. Tirard, and descended into his garden of a morning. She

made friends also with Madame his wife, for the interested purpose of going to market with her. M. M. had conceived a deep design; she was bent on renewing Aunt Lena's youth and beauty by the means that Kate had mentioned. In the conceit of ignorance she made belief that their housekeeping purse would provide better fare than Abigail gave them, and she set forth to try, nobody disallowing her. The experiment in a financial point of view was doubtful, or rather, it was a foregone case for failure; but Mary Martha saw Aunt Lena's cheeks filling out and she went recklessly on until she saw also the bottom of the purse through the chink of a very few francs—and the end of the month ten days off.

But for the ignorance and confidence of young people nothing would ever get itself done. Their blindness shuts out fear and the future. M. M. believed the story of the widow's cruse, and was sure that her oil would not fail. It was very near it,

however; she was on the verge of being anxious for the morrow, when she bethought her of those old ornaments that came with her from Bombay, and brought them out to examine. "What do I care for them?" she said. "They are not pretty; I shall sell them;" and she despatched them in a registered box to her Uncle John, who was in Paris again for a few days on his way back from Wiesbaden. Mary Martha told him in the accompanying letter the reason why she wished to exchange them for money; and Elizabeth did not see why she should not have her own way, sell them for a good present purpose, and hope for brighter days. They were Indian stones, uncut and rudely set, but precious, and Mr. Sheffield sent Mary Martha only an instalment of what they sold for, telling her that he was her banker for the balance. M. M. could not keep her clever little transaction to herself; she must share the joy of it with somebody, and she told Marguerite.

“Mamma will guess,” said that dear wise-head. “Something has come over her to be tranquil, and let herself be taken care of. It is the same as when one has been very ill—then one leaves oneself to the angels, and to the kind nurses who are like them.”

It was a sweet interlude that followed on Katherine’s marriage. She had been the yearning spirit of the house, with her great gifts and many desires. There had not been time to make the English cousin acquainted with her accomplishments, but Mary Martha heard of them now that she was gone away. Marguerite, who had so little and yet was grateful, explained Kate’s discontent as being the shadow of her talents, cramped for room. “She is appreciated by Mons. de Marcel—there will be opportunities at the château.” Marguerite did not attempt to specify what opportunities—perhaps she would have had a difficulty—but she meant that her sister had gone from a life irksomely narrow to a life of space, air, and activity.

It was a narrow life, truly, that they had led in the old house on the ramparts of St. Croix ; but Mary Martha loved her company, and soon grew fond of the brick terrace with its smiling prospects, and of the old house with its odd contrivances. One day was much like another, but the atmosphere was clear and kindly, if the hours were slow. At nine there was *café-au-lait*, at one there was *déjeuner*, at six there was *diner*. Mary Martha was in possession of Katherine's vacated room, and the *salle-à-manger*, ten feet wide by fourteen long, had reverted to its proper uses ; but the early breakfast and the *déjeuner* were always taken on the terrace, unless rain was falling. Marguerite lived in the open air, and loved silence about her, which her mother seldom broke. Mary Martha's time to talk with Aunt Lena was in the evening, when they walked out together, oftenest in the broad *allées* shaded with trees, which encompassed the town.

Fifteen years had passed since Mrs. Devine

came to St. Croix with her husband and children—fugitives from a worse fate. Sacrifices had been made by her brother; all that she had of her own was sacrificed, and all was not enough. Their uncle, Mr. Brooke, of Harden Tower, refused to help in the crisis, with the rider that he hoped to see Devine transported. The law had not the handling of Captain Devine, but perhaps he only escaped by dying opportunely. His grave was still kept and visited in the cemetery outside the walls. When Katherine called herself her father's child it was by way of exulting over the spindle-side of the house; for the children had been told that he was strong and handsome and clever, but not that any cloud obscured his name. It is not necessary to define what was become dim and confused even in the recollection of survivors who had suffered by him. The father's sin was not likely to be visited further upon his children, unless it came out in a fault of character.

Katherine was not like her father, only in the face.

Mary Martha had been given a general knowledge of her Aunt Lena's tragedy. It was because of the sacrifices that Captain Brooke had made for his sister that M. M. had nothing of her own, and this also had been communicated to her. M. M.'s mother and her Aunt Martha had not money, but her Uncle John had done by her the part of a generous friend and kinsman. Even the small pension granted to her as the daughter of an officer killed in the field Mr. Sheffield had put away, to be a little purse for her in case of need. When he mentioned it to her once, *case of need* sounded like a myth; but M. M. had already remembered it at St. Croix, with thanks to Uncle John that she was not utterly without the defence of money.

Aunt Lena and Mary Martha were very open to each other on all these things. Half confidences and half reserves would have

made discomfort between them; but once talked over and understood they were let drop, and not allowed to spoil their evening walks. M. M. delighted in the old-world novelty of the place, its quaintnesses and luxuriences mingled. Overhead the dense trees; at their feet the moat, full of gardens, of sweetness; and beyond that, brown walls, tall outstanding towers, deep embrasures of windows, white curtains, waving draperies of vines flowing down; five centuries ago and to-day linked together with green garlands and wreaths of roses.

Then Mrs. Devine told stories of when she was a little girl, and M. M.'s father was only a schoolboy. It seemed quite easy for her to forget the great gulf between then and now, and to enjoy the pranks and feasts of those days over again. There was nothing adventurous or romantic in their youth, but the merry schoolboy had won a hero's death, and the silly girl had gone adrift on whelming floods of troubles. She spoke of St. Croix

as a very haven, and said that the dearest hope she had was just to outlive Marguerite, and then to depart.

“Now—do you feel so *now*, Aunt Lena?” M. M. asked, in accents of remonstrance and almost of reproach; for her Aunt Lena was in appearance much the better for the care and kindness of which she was the object, and it would have pleased her caretaker to hear that the improvement was not external merely.

Mrs. Devine said that she *did*; her life had tired her so that even in resting she felt tired when she thought about it.

M. M. took up the question warmly: “Oh, but we are going to change all that. Marguerite no more looks like dying than I do, and there are numbers of things well worth seeing and doing in the world that now is. You are only two since Kate is married, and two are easier to move than three. Is it sure that Marguerite will never walk again?” M. M. thought that she might.

Mrs. Devine shook her head mournfully.

Marguerite had not been always on her back. Till nine years old she walked and ran like other children ; then a fall in the garden, when she was alone—not much of a fall as she described it—had reduced her to this pitiable condition of helplessness. They had done what they could for her at St. Croix, but the highest surgical skill was costly, and further to seek, and they had not sought it—were not able to seek it.

Mary Martha could not understand giving the poor child up until the resources of science were pronounced exhausted : “Great-uncle Brooke might have helped you,” she suggested, considering eagerly whether it was too late.

“I did not ask him. He had refused me in deeper need, and all communication had been dropped,” Aunt Lena replied.

“But you had a right to ask him—a *right*. Men will often do the good they are

expected to do, though they may not look like it until they are tried ; so I have been told."

Mrs. Devine made no answer to this general proposition. She had not tried her Uncle Brooke in Marguerite's case. She believed that he had no milk of human kindness in him, that his heart was as hard as the nether millstone, and she said so to M. M., who was indulging a different opinion. M. M. wished to inquire a little into his personal history, but her Aunt Lena said that he had none ; he was a bachelor, the eldest of four brothers—of whom only one married—a man extravagant in his youth, but reforming in good time, and becoming a creditable head of the family.

"And after him there are no more Brookes but me?" said M. M. cheerfully. "Aunt Lena, I shall write and request the pleasure of his acquaintance."

"Not while you are at St. Croix—I

entreat you not! It would be a re-opening of old wounds," Mrs. Devine cried, alarmed.

"But to defer it for six months? Who can tell what may happen in six months? They said so when they sent me away from Thornhill with all my portable treasures." (The Indian shawls were in the sea-going travellers' trunk, deposited in the vault next the kitchen, to stand by till the cold weather.)

"You will not write, dear, if I beg you not?" Mrs. Devine urged.

This did not seem a quite sufficient reason to M. M., but she promised not to write to-morrow. "Not absolutely *to-morrow*," she repeated. "I'll knock at Uncle John's door first, and hear what he has to say about it."

Mrs. Devine raised no objection to that, and Mary Martha knocked at her Uncle John's door with a whole catechism of questions. Aunt Martha was deputed to answer her. None of them at Thornhill had ever seen her great-uncle Brooke. When she

was sent home from Bombay, it was to Thornhill she was consigned, and to the care of her mother's sister. Her Uncle John did not like joint charges, and her great-uncle Brooke had not been inquired of by them whether he desired to have any share in her. And on his part, her great-uncle Brooke had taken no notice of her—might be, for aught they knew to the contrary, as ignorant of her existence as she was of his, until Katherine Devine brought up his name at St. Croix. In this they acknowledged a culpable remissness, and were of opinion—one and all, at Thornhill—that if M. M. were likely to hear of anything to her advantage by writing to her great-uncle Brooke, she would be wise to do it; and her Uncle John sent her his hearty permission, and would be glad to know if there were good results.

This way of putting the matter quelled Mary Martha's ardour. She had not any special concern for her own advantage yet; Marguerite had been the leading person in

her mind when she proposed to open a correspondence. Her Aunt Lena asked what she meant to do, and she said, to let it alone for the present. But she did not forget that she had a great-uncle Brooke in reserve for an emergency.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEAST OF OLD SONGS.

“ Music can noble hints impart,
Engender fury, kindle love ;
With unsuspected eloquence can move,
And manage all the man with secret art.”

ADDISON.

THE monotonous, tranquil days went on. Mary Martha had to invent her own occupations and amusements. She liked them of a social and active sort, but as few such were to be had, she presently recollected that she could draw a little, and from the terrace and the garden below she made numerous studies of trees and clouds, and of the old houses, irregular and picturesque, that clustered upon the ramparts. Mr. Ockleston had requested her to sketch always out of doors, and had promised to

her mind when she proposed to open a correspondence. Her Aunt Lena asked what she meant to do, and she said, to let it alone for the present. But she did not forget that she had a great-uncle Brooke in reserve for an emergency.

and having this liberty she had been pleased to keep it to herself. It was not a burdensome story in any way.

It happened, therefore, that Mr. Ockleston appeared as a surprise upon the scene. One morning when Mary Martha was going with Madame Tirard to the early market of country produce, basket in hand, to bring home her marketings, she saw a tall, lean figure in a light summer overcoat advancing towards them from the distance of the narrow street. It was Mr. Ockleston, so English, so fresh and cool and neat, so like a Saxby garden-party of a chilly afternoon, that M. M. blushed for her basket, which made no pretensions to being anything but useful.

"French country fashions, sir," said she, dropping him a pretty curtsy in recognition of his bow.

Mr. Ockleston was too utterly polite; he forgot to smile, he was even confused, possibly he was put out. (One's contem-

porary would have proposed to carry the basket.)

Madame Tirard, a very stout old lady, of high complexion, gazed at the stranger, and at the young lady's face which was also glowing under the poke of her hat. But M. M. quickly recovered herself, and Mr. Ockleston said, also recovering himself, that he was just looking round the charming old town, which he found scarcely changed since his visit of twenty years ago.

"The market is a pretty bit; we are on our way there, Madame Tirard and I," M. M. said.

Mr. Ockleston took off his hat to Madame Tirard, and would not delay them. Such early goers to market must needs intend to be well served. With Miss Brooke's permission, he would call upon Mrs. Devine and herself later in the day—after four o'clock.

"That is the house, with the balcony and

flowers over the door," M. M. said, and pointed to it.

Mr. Ockleston intimated that he had already sought it out—*last evening*, at once, upon his arrival—which was a return to his better mind, proving that M. M.'s beauty and bright pleasantness were, on second thoughts, almost a makeweight for the market-basket and her striped linen costume that matched it.

Mary Martha's business was promptly despatched that morning, and she made haste back to her Aunt Lena to relate the adventure.

"Oh, Aunt Lena, so delightful! There is a friend of ours at Thornhill come to St. Croix! We met him, Madame Tirard and I. He may, perhaps, call this afternoon. Such a dear, kind old gentleman—Mr. Ockleston. His house is on the Green at Saxby; he knows St. Croix quite well!"

Mrs. Devine looked up, and seeing that M. M. was lively and glad, and spoke

of a dear *old* gentleman, she heard only what she was meant to hear, and thought only what she was meant to think. A short while ago she would have shrunk from the ordeal of receiving a visit from a gentleman who came from England and was a stranger to her, but now she was prepared to welcome it rather than not.

It has been said elsewhere that Mr. Ockleston was a man of refined tastes and many accomplishments. He was a true artist in feeling, and could not approve of his dear young friend wearing a *bonne's* dress and carrying a basket to market. She might have made a pretty picture so, but even that was not certain, for her figure wanted the squareness, and her face the fulness, of the ideal *bonne*. She was rather the young lady in masquerade, and that little curtsey was a part of the play. Mr. Ockleston was haunted all the morning by the vision of the incongruous figure, and even thought that

he must venture to speak to Miss Brooke upon the subject.

But every such thought and intention left him, never to be remembered any more, during his visit in the afternoon to the old house on the ramparts. He could not but be sensible of the bareness of it, but the sweet air blown in from the garden, and the pretty arrangement of things, gave the shabby brown *salon* a grace and charm that is often wanting in finer quarters. In the deep recess of the great window to the west, where the *jalousies* were closed, the chairs stood about sociably; and Mrs. Devine, in a dark dress, her beautiful hair all roughly massed, was like a picture well set there. She had a delicate after-bloom upon her cheeks, and a clear shining in her eyes, as when the rain is over; and Mary Martha, contemplating her with innocent wonderment while they waited for their visitor, was impelled to cry out that Aunt Lena was lovely, *quite lovely!*

Marguerite turned her head to see. "Come and kiss me, mamma! You *dear* mamma, you are *always* lovely!" said she, with enthusiasm. Mrs. Devine accepted their compliments; she was used to her children's flattery; but the after-bloom and the clear shining were both a little brighter. When most careworn and wasted, her former beauty would still assert itself.

It was at this moment that Abigail threw open the door, and announced Mr. Ockleston. Mary Martha, slim and comparatively insignificant in her yellowed India muslin, stood up and performed the ceremony of introduction, blushing at her own secret fears lest her concealments should now be brought into the light. But Mr. Ockleston seemed scarcely conscious of her—he was bowing towards Mrs. Devine. Perhaps he did not see well at the moment of passing out of the broad sun-glare of the street into the shaded room, and in that moment Mary Martha stepped metaphorically into the back-

ground, from which she did not emerge again until this second act of her little comedy was played out. She enjoyed what remained of it excessively; it was a thing quite in her way to enjoy. There were the two chief players seated opposite in the recess: Mr. Ockleston—the curly brimmed hat on the floor beside him—gazing with the subdued admiration of a connoisseur and a devotee at a mellow portrait by the grandest of old masters, in the face of Mrs. Devine. That was the impression the lady made upon him, and that was how Mary Martha felt it.

“I set his fancy to this music, but the tune is changing,” M. M. chanted to herself, mirthfully.

She had to take her own small part in hearing and asking questions about Thornhill, and everybody at home, but the conversation passed away from her soon to quite other interests.

The two graver voices sank a tone lower

as they talked. It was of Monsieur de Marcel now and Katherine, and now it was of many years ago, and of places and people forgotten, with whom it appeared that once they had a common acquaintance. M. M. felt like a listener out of place, and slipped over to Marguerite, who nodded to her with eyebrows raised—as who should say: “Struck, quite struck—both of them!”

Mr. Ockleston continued seated and absorbed a long while, and even when he picked up the curly brimmed hat and rose from his chair he did not go. He had still something else to say, and Mrs. Devine encouraged him by her soft, assiduous attention. They talked themselves into the middle of the room, and the door was close at Mr. Ockleston’s right hand when the terrace, visible through the long window open upon it, attracted his notice; “How charming—we have nothing so simply charming as this in England; our climate does not allow it,” he said; and with a gesture of asking per-

mission, which the lady gave with a motion of her hand, he walked out upon the bricks, and there again stood and talked.

But everything has an end. The visitor finally went away down the steps and through the garden, which had a door of communication with the *allée* beyond. Mrs. Devine returned slowly and thoughtfully to the *salon*. The young people watched her coming in, smiling to herself, perhaps even gently excited, and felt rather curious to hear the cause of it.

"You must be fatigued, poor mamma! Come and tell us all you found to talk about so long," cried Marguerite, with pressing sympathy.

"I am not fatigued, dearest. It is a true pleasure to hear of old friends, and even of old enemies when one has lived out of the world fifteen years." Mrs. Devine spoke with a vivacity quite remarkable.

"I am glad that Mr. Ockleston suits you, Aunt Lena. He is excellent—*most excellent*

—and his information, I believe, *inexhaustible*. He is coming again, no doubt, as he did not take leave of *me* !” ‘Mary Martha said, in a cordial tone of appropriation.

“ Yes, dear. He proposes making some stay at St. Croix. He mentioned that he was here with an object.”

M. M. caught her breath, then mother-wit came to her deliverance. “ He paints and draws, Aunt Lena ; he is a distinguished amateur. Perhaps he will give me a few hints.”

“ If you ask him, perhaps he will ; but are you advanced enough to profit by hints, dear ?”

“ Oh, yes, I hope so ! I expect that he has come on a sketching tour. We shall see him constantly, Aunt Lena. We are quite old friends at Saxby. You won’t object ?”

“ No, dear, not if to see him constantly is a pleasure to you — being such old friends.”

Again M. M. had a spasm of terror, for

her Aunt Lena looked pensively up in her face.

But Mrs. Devine was not of a suspicious temper, and as M. M. held her peace, refraining from further attempts at explanation, the moment of peril passed. The visit had been a little variety for the poor lady, a little fresh air to her spirits. She seemed happier all the rest of the evening, and once remarked that perhaps they had been too reserved, too shut up within themselves ; then added, that to be very poor is like having a bolt upon the door always shot home.

Mr. Ockleston, to the astonishment of Mary Martha, did not appear the following day at the house.

"What can he have done with himself?" she said at *dîner*. "You are sure that he is coming again, Aunt Lena? I did not hear yesterday one-tenth part of what I want to know about all of them at home."

"There will be other opportunities, dear," her Aunt Lena replied. "It has been such

a still, beautiful day that Mr. Ockleston may have taken advantage of it to go sketching. The sketch you made this morning was the prettiest you have done yet."

"Yes; I hoped that he would drop in, and happen to see me at it. Then it would have been easy to ask for a few hints. Mr. Ockleston is famous for his skies and distances. There is so much air in his pictures."

"He is very pleasant in conversation, too——"

"Now, *do* you think so, mamma?" Marguerite said, suggesting a contrary opinion.

"Well, yes, dearest; I *do*. Amongst the good gifts that your English cousin has brought us, I think we shall have to count the acquaintance of this agreeable Mr. Ockleston."

"Mr. Ockleston is never long, never *prosy*. It is we young people who are prosy—who say so many words about a thing," M. M. testified.

Marguerite laughed. Mrs. Devine smiled

and coloured very slightly. The English cousin was quizzical, she thought.

Mary Martha had shown herself aggrieved that day because Mr. Ockleston failed to come, but on the next, when he did present himself, and at four o'clock again, she was missing, and no one there able, or at liberty to seek her.

Marguerite, who was on the terrace, intimated that she could not be very far off, as she had gone down the steps not ten minutes ago. "She will hear if you call, mamma."

But Mrs. Devine only looked out over the garden without raising her voice, and then re-entered the *salon*, informing Mr. Ockleston that his young friend would soon arrive: she was somewhere about the house or garden.

Mr. Ockleston bore Mary Martha's absence with equanimity, and disposed himself for conversation with Mrs. Devine as before. Marguerite heard the long hum rising and falling in the drowsy afternoon. She dropped her book, and passed into the dreamland

between waking and sleeping, to be roused after a long interval by a foot on the bricks. It was the visitor and her mother stepping forth upon the terrace.

Mr. Ockleston advanced to the parapet, and made a close inspection of the bushy region below.

Just then a window above the verandah was opened, and Mary Martha put out her head, crying with sweet surprise: "Oh, are *you* there, Mr. Ockleston?"

Mr. Ockleston turned sharply and looked up, and her Aunt Lena did the same. "Where have *you* been, dear, all this while? We have been seeking you," said Mrs. Devine. "Pray come down now."

Mary Martha drew in her head, and descended, her sketching block in one hand, her palette and camel's-hair pencils in the other. Her old friend was not so composed as her Aunt Lena, and there was a disturbed tremor in his glance as M. M. came out through the *salon*, and their eyes met. "This

is such a pretty time of day—the shadows between five and six o'clock are so soft in the valley," said she, choosing to take it for granted that Mr. Ockleston was surveying the prospect and admiring it.

"I was searching the bushes down here, if, perhaps, you might be eating gooseberries," Mr. Ockleston replied.

"Oh, but gooseberries are over—*quite* over!" rejoined M. M., and she laughed merrily, then blushed in recalling that episode.

Mrs. Devine did not understand the allusion, and passed it by to observe that there was nowhere in the neighbourhood a more beautiful view of the distant country than from their little terrace. Mr. Ockleston turned again, and availed himself of the opportunity of considering it. He said that it would compose well, there were all the makings of a picture in it; and then, as it seemed to everybody, he got himself rather abruptly away.

"What is he in such a hurry for?" Mary Martha asked, debonairly.

"Perhaps Mr. Ockleston hoped, that as he did not come yesterday, you would be in to receive him to-day—being such old friends," said her Aunt Lena. "He waited a long while—I am sure he was very patient."

"If Mr. Ockleston expects me to be on the spot to receive him, he should let me know when he is coming," M. M. answered; and to herself she said, "Can he have told? *can he have told?*"

But her Aunt Lena made no sign.

For three successive days after this Mr. Ockleston suffered himself to be watched for in vain. Mary Martha was uneasy. If she had prankishly avoided him, he was now seriously avoiding her—and she did not quite like it. She liked to be friends. When the third day closed she suggested to her Aunt Lena that Mr. Ockleston should be invited to *dinner*—he might be looking for an invitation.

"Are you in earnest? Do you really mean it, dear?" was the slow, doubting reply.

"*Yes*; and Madame Tirard must give us a little *dîner en fête*, such as she gave for me the evening I arrived. We will have the comical dish that is all in pieces, and pile it up with fruit—plums and apricots and grapes."

"Well, dear, if you *wish* it"—Mrs. Devine was evidently only half averse to the proposal.

"Oh, thanks, *thanks*, Aunt Lena! *Will* you write the note and let Abigail carry it to-night?—Say *to-morrow*. She need not wait for an answer; it will come in the morning."

M. M. could be very persuasive, and was in flowing spirits when her Aunt Lena yielded, and the note was despatched. She did not know that the invitation was given in her name, and as by her request; but it was so, and a cordial acceptance was the result.

During that interim of his three days' absence, Mr. Ockleston had walked about a good deal, had made sketches, reflections and resolutions. The sketches he proposed to carry with him to the house on the ramparts, and to present them to Mary Martha in token of amity ; and some of the reflections were to the effect that his dear young friend was younger and wiser than he had before perceived ; that a very little further foolishness on his part would diminish her respect and alienate her childlike affection ; and that his best policy would be to acquiesce in the denial which she had given him at Thornhill. What other reflections he had tending to this conclusion it is not necessary to enumerate ; they had their special consequences later on.

Mr. Ockleston would have said, had he been inquired of, that he spent a most delightful evening at Mrs. Devine's. That lady was as lovely, as worthy of respectful study as at first sight, and no one was unkind enough to tell him that the remark was not

original when he called attention to the singular resemblance that Mary Martha bore to her Aunt Lena. It seemed to strike him newly, and as a happy coincidence, at the instant of seeing them again in the *salon* together.

“Do you think I shall be as handsome as Aunt Lena when I am as old, Mr. Ockleston?” M. M. asked, leaning her face up side by side with the maturer beauty, who did not decline the test.

“You may be if you are as good,” said the gentleman pleasantly.

M. M. laughed, and seeing the roll of papers he carried, wished to know if they were sketches that he had been making, and if she might look at them. “You promised to give me a few hints, if you remember,” said she, and not staying for any answer, went off with the roll to Marguerite on the terrace, to divide the amusement with her.

The sketches were scarcely begun to be inspected when Mr. Ockleston came out, and

offered his hand to conduct M. M. to dinner. She gave hers with a pretty grace, and he said, for her ear only: "What have you to say to me?"

"Nothing—except, *be friends.*" A silent pressure of her little hand was sufficient response—that, and just the ghost of a sigh.

Madame Tirard had surpassed the effort that she made to welcome the English cousin by as much as Mr. Ockleston's cultivated taste and appreciation surpassed M. M.'s, who could eat gooseberries in a garden half the afternoon without a thought of spoiling her dinner. Mrs. Devine told the story of the wonderful dish that was in twenty pieces, and alluded to the antique silver that furnished her table—the parents of Monsieur Tirard had come into possession of those valuables in the revolutionary period that desolated France towards the close of the last century. Formerly this house, which Monsieur Tirard held as his own property, was all one with the houses adjoining it on either

side, which had many signs of having been occupied by a family of the nobility. Mrs. Devine never omitted this information when she entertained a stranger ; not that it was of itself rare and interesting, but from a long ago conceived feeling that she must not allow herself to be honoured as the owner of that priceless dish and those attenuated spoons.

There was a shabby piano in the *salon* that had served Katherine since the learning of her notes, on which Mr. Ockleston proposed a little music. Mary Martha played a pretty piece of Schubert's, and then Marguerite from the terrace called, "Make mamma sing. Mamma, give us a feast of your old songs!"

Mrs. Devine did not wait to be entreated. Mr. Ockleston turned towards her with an animated countenance, as if he would enjoy such a feast, and she just sat down, and without notes or words, sang song after song that her children knew as well as her speaking voice. It was the same gift that Mary Martha

had, and she had been exceedingly well taught. M. M. sat by, gazing into her Aunt Lena's face, which kindled with the spirit or melted with the pathos of her theme. It was a lesson. M. M. had been well taught too, but she had much yet to learn before she could enchant a listener as Mr. Ockleston sat enchanted.

The sunset was splendid that evening, and when Mrs. Devine ceased singing Mary Martha went out to Marguerite unforbidden.

The glories faded, the amber twilight faded, night was at hand. The girls had been an hour on the terrace alone.

"*Hum, hum, hum*, they are fellow-creatures in there," Marguerite said drolly, with a sign indicative of the two in the *salon*.

M. M. said nothing, but she thought the more.

CHAPTER X.

ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER.

"So good luck came, and on my roof did light,
Not all at once, but gently—as the trees
Are by the sunbeams tickled, by degrees."

HERRICK.

MR. OCKLESTON must have written to Thornhill the day after Mary Martha had spoken her last word in their affair ; for as quickly as the post could bring it she received a letter from Elizabeth. It was not an unreasonable letter, nor an unkind letter, but it made M. M.'s cheeks hot. Elizabeth said that they could not but feel sorry for the news they had received from St. Croix. They had hoped, particularly her Aunt Martha, that she would see her own happiness in it, and accept Mr. Ockleston's proposal. They were sure that he must feel himself unfairly treated,

for she had certainly given him encouragement. This was very naughty; she had done the same thing once before, and if she made a practice of it people would set her down as a little flirt. Papa wanted to know if she had anything to tell yet about her great-uncle Brooke; if she had not claimed kinship with him, mother and all of them strongly advised her to lose no more time in doing it. Papa was not so well again since they had been at home, and he was going to Scarborough with Jane next week, to try what the sea air would do towards bracing him up before the winter.

Mary Martha had a warmth of temper in reserve for fit occasions. She took up her pen on the spur of the moment, and wrote six lines to Elizabeth: "My dear love to Uncle John, and I know *he* does not blame me. Wait awhile, and you will see what you will see. There is better in store for Mr. Ockleston than your little cousin. It was only the prelude to the Lover's Rondo we

played. The key is changing: *the key has changed*, and now begins the melody! It goes like the tune of some very old song, and the second performer is an angel, *an angel!*"

Fortunately Elizabeth had more discretion than M. M. in a pet. She destroyed the letter without revealing it to her mother or sisters, and when Mr. Ockleston reappeared at Saxby he was met with the respectful sympathy and commiseration that he might naturally be supposed to deserve. At the end of the month he left again, and the following Monday a staff of superior workmen came over from Blackchester, and took possession of his house to clean and paint it inside and out. Nobody thought much of that, only Kitty Clewer did not quite credit that he had commanded this thorough renovation of his house to come home to it himself alone.

In her next letter Elizabeth made allusion to these important works, and begged to have Mary Martha's enigma unriddled. She wrote

in the spirit of compromise, and mentioned people who had escaped mention at previous writings. She gave the particulars of a visit that she had paid to Mrs. Holland, and brought in the name of Mr. George Marriott. As M. M. read it she blushed warmly, and there was the glitter and dimness of tears in her eyes for some time after. She did not know herself for a too-exacting, sensitive creature, but in this absence she had learned the disappointment of letters. Elizabeth's letters had been singular for their omissions ; and from Mrs. Holland she had received no letter at all. In the tenderness of parting Mary Martha had proposed a correspondence, and she had written two letters which remained unanswered yet. The dear old lady promised not to forget her, and this was what had come of her promise.

To do Mrs. Holland justice, she had replied punctually to both those letters from M. M. ; but as hers bore the same erroneous address that she had given to George, they

were relegated to the same limbo. M. M. could have no notion of this ill-turn the fates were doing her ; but always there was measure in her grieving. She was pained and surprised to be so soon forgotten, but still she was able to devise pleas and excuses for it. Also, *apropos* of a lesser grievance which she spoke of (she did not speak of this one), Aunt Lena counselled her not to dwell too much on the apparent negligence of friends, and above all not to exaggerate the claims of simple acquaintanceship. Circumstances were continually arising, she said, to alter the relative positions of friends without their mutual kindness being in any way diminished. It might never be quite the same with them any more, but they themselves were the same. This sounded to M. M. like wisdom in a foreign tongue. Her dream was of an imaginative fidelity ; she loved approbation, and to be dearly loved ; but being strong in the hopefulness of her young days it is probable that she

never slept a wink the worse for anybody's falling short of her ideal constancy.

Still she must have had some secret, sweet fount of love in her light heart when the mention of a mere name in a letter called up blushes and tears. All that morning she was happy, thinking. In the evening a word was said of when she would go home to Thornhill again. Aunt Lena fell into a reverie upon it, and Marguerite pretended that she would never be able to let her go. But Mary Martha said, "There must come a time—there must come a time!"

From this they passed into a conversation about that *money*, concerning which Katherine had expressed so keen a personal anxiety. M. M. seemed naturally incurious: she had never yet pressed to know its story. Mrs. Devine said that it was an old story, begun at the least a century ago, of which the conclusion was now drawing near. A visitor from England last March had reminded her of it in her children's presence, and had asked

- more questions than she was able to answer. She believed that the gist of the story was a deferred inheritance that must fall to the Brooke reigning in Harden at a certain date; and as her Uncle Richard was in possession of the Tower, she supposed that it would fall to him. Only of one thing she was quite sure—that neither to herself nor to her children could that money matter one whit; for which reason she had refused to disquiet her mind dreaming of it. Since Heaven had granted her a time of peace, she was disposed to rest and be thankful with the blessings and comforts she had.

Mr. Ockleston had come to Normandy again.

It was in the beautiful weather of October, when the leaves are changing, though the summer is still warm in the noontide air. All had been quiet and monotonous at the house on the ramparts for several weeks. Mr. Ockleston came to St. Croix, but he was not there always. He travelled off to Caen, Lisieux,

Bayeux, and returned with more sketches. His comings and goings made little breaks that Mrs. Devine took an interest in. When he was at St. Croix they walked occasionally in the shaded *allées* of an afternoon; or he came to the terrace to paint on a general view of the valley which he was taking at Marguerite's request. In his absences the chief events were letters—letters from Monsieur de Marcel and Katherine in the Austrian Tyrol, and other letters which Mrs. Devine did not read to her children. She was sometimes lost in reverie, but her spirits were good. One day she laughed, then blushed because she had laughed. There was no visible reason at all—no one was there but the children, no one was saying anything. It must have been, then, at her own thoughts.

“I cannot imagine what has come to you, mamma,” said Marguerite. “It must be Mr. Ockleston!”

M. M. gazed, a solemn question in her face, and her Aunt Lena answered it.

"Yes, dear, you have guessed right. Men marry widows, I think, because they pity them! I trust that I shall be able to add to Mr. Ockleston's comfort and happiness; as I am sure that it is his wish to add to mine."

Marguerite intimated that she wanted to kiss her mother.

M. M.'s countenance beamed, listening to the little speech of announcement which they had precipitated. "I am glad, *so glad!* May I, *may I*, dear Aunt Lena, write the news to Thornhill?" she cried ecstatically? "It will be perfect—*perfect!*" cried she again. "It is the bit of good luck, above all else, that I could have wished for you!"

The poor lady might have preferred more sober congratulations, but M. M. was quite carried away. The mischief, the fun, the triumph of telling Mr. Ockleston's news to the sisters at Thornhill danced before her imagination like a revel of good things, but

she had to forego that yet. Mrs. Devine said: "No, dear. Our plans are not settled, and Mr. Ockleston might not approve."

"Perhaps not," M. M. said musingly.

Mr. Ockleston was away from St. Croix at the time, and was not to return for some days. When he returned, almost the first word that he had to hear from Mrs. Devine was how his young friend from home had become mistress of their sentimental affairs.

"And what did she say?" the gentleman asked.

"She was excessively glad. She wished to write off to Thornhill instantly."

"You prevented that?"

"Yes."

Though Mr. Ockleston had once mentioned to Mrs. Devine that he had an object in coming to St. Croix, he had never mentioned what the object was, and he perceived that neither had Mary Martha made any boast of his *aberration*. Mr. Ockleston was not a closely introspective person, and to pass that

episode over lightly and slightly was the only way. To Mrs. Devine he said nothing yet; with Mary Martha he sought a moment alone, and what he said after does not matter. Both had a conscious air, but M. M.'s countenance cleared with a merry laugh.

"Oh, do forgive me, Mr. Ockleston! It was a day to be praised when you came to St. Croix! And do, *please* do, let me have the reporting of our little comedy to Thornhill first," pleaded she.

Mr. Ockleston seemed to enter into her view of the situation, and said slowly: "Well but try not to be *too* severe."

"My vanity is involved, so you are safe! I shall put the last act in the light of a double compliment to *me*—because Aunt Lena is *so* like me."

Mr. Ockleston refrained from further deprecatory suggestion, and Mary Martha's letter of good news awakened the laughing echoes of the old schoolroom day after day, until they were finally hushed by the deepen-

ing anxieties which began to prevail at Thornhill.

Mr. Sheffield's health was so far worse before the end of the month, that the journey to Scarborough with Jane was reluctantly abandoned. As his strength failed, his spirits failed, and there was not much consolation in reflecting that poor papa always had a grievance when he was ill. He talked often of the circumstances in which he was leaving his family; and while saying that there was nothing to come out of which they would need to feel ashamed, he warned them that their position would be changed, and the girls' fortunes very far short of what he had once hoped and expected; but they must do their best. He was constantly concerned for the little cousin also, and was in anxiety whether she had ever written to her great-uncle Brooke, as there was no second mention of him in her letters. She had not written. The way in which permission to write was put had checked her alacrity. She had not

conceived any special plans for her own advantage, and was thinking it best to wait until she was sought.

The question of her great-uncle Brooke had, however, assumed a new and near importance now to all of them, and there was some proposal of an appeal to him from Thornhill. But first they would inquire of Mrs. Holland what character Mr. Brooke bore in his own county.

His house of Harden Tower was at the end of that fine range of hills, overlooking the plain country, where the smoke-clouds of Hardenware hung upon the horizon. Stockleigh was of that region, too, and Mrs. Holland (of the Marriotts of Stockleigh) was likely to know. It was on a Sunday morning, crossing the Green after church, that the girls asked these questions.

"George is here. George can tell you more than I can," the old lady said. "Shall I send him up to Thornhill in the afternoon?"

Elizabeth replied that they would be very glad to see Mr. George Marriott, independently of any information that he could give them about Harden Tower and its owner. The tennis-parties had ceased with the fine weather, and George had no longer any plea for a weekly visit—but he said often that he had never visited at a pleasanter house. It was positively the pleasantest house in the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT NEXT ?

“The future does not come from before to meet us, but comes streaming up from behind over our heads.”—RAHEL.

Now it so happened that during the previous week, Mr. George Marriott had had returned to him, from the dusty rack of the French post-office, that momentous letter which he had despatched to St. Croix in the wake of Miss Brooke, and his heart was softened towards her indescribably. It had been as a very stone while he believed that she had the letter and gave him no answer ; but since it had come back to him, her dear eyes never having seen it, he felt a thousand wraths, pities, spites, vexations, and Mrs. Holland thought his feelings none too much. Her own, because of her blunder, causing his mischance, were beyond words to utter.

She had been for letting the letter go again, but George could not do that. He knew girls a little, having sisters, and said that he must see Mary Martha first; and that the letter which had missed its mark must not be mentioned except between themselves. The secret troubled Mrs. Holland, but George refused her leave to impart it, though he allowed her to preserve the letter. Her own letters had also found their way back to her, and, in the annoyance of the moment, had been committed to the flames. It was vain to speculate what M. M. might have hoped, feared, fancied in the interval—all that was shut up in her own tender, soft breast. George had heard of her everyday life rather frequently. Her correspondence with Thornhill was reported of, as lively and descriptive. She was said to like everything and everybody at St. Croix, and might not have had a dull moment, or a retrospective moment, since she went away from Saxby. ‘Very uninteresting,’ George had said drily;

but when Mrs. Holland brought him word that he was invited up to Mr. Sheffield's on that Sunday afternoon, to speak of a matter that nearly concerned her, he went with the utmost alacrity.

Mr. George Marriott had become quite friendly at Thornhill. The Saturday tennis had been a welcome resource to him while it lasted. He was constantly hopeful of hearing some word of Miss Brooke that might not be uninteresting; for though he was displeased, he could not rid himself of wanting to know all that was to be known of the object of his displeasure. He had even established a tone of confidential *persiflage* with Miss Ann Sheffield, out of which he extracted some solace, the latest application of balm being an intimation from her that nothing serious was likely to come to M. M. of Mr. Ockleston's passion—for it was being diverted to another lady.

Time brings counsel. The three sisters had made up their minds that George

Marriott was smitten with none of them ; but they always received him cordially, a compliment which he acknowledged by liking them all alike. That he cared most to hear of the little cousin was no mystery, and they indulged him or disappointed him as the spirit of kindness or perversity prompted. His case was not treated as acute, though they believed it genuine.

Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield were alone in the drawing-room when their visitor was ushered in. The invalid had the perplexed grey face of mortal disease. George was shocked to see him, so altered was he since the last time he was there.

The girls arrived one after the other from the garden and the village school, and the five-o'clock tea-table was set in the midst of a cheerful bustle of general talk. It was not until Elizabeth began to pour out tea that Mr. Brooke's name was mentioned, and though George had received some hint from Mrs. Holland that he was wanted to give

information of a neighbour at home on Mary Martha's account, the interrogatory took him by surprise. Mr. Brooke was a personage in the parts about Stockleigh, but Harden Tower and Stockleigh Manor were not friends together, had no neighbourly dealings with one another.

"Am I to understand that Miss Brooke is a relative of Mr. Brooke of Harden Tower?" the young man asked, in a voice of almost consternation.

"She is Mr. Brooke's great-niece, his only relative of the name, according to what she tells us," Mr. Sheffield answered.

"Then she must be the grand-daughter of the old Rector of Stockleigh. Did her father lose his life in India, in the Mutiny?"

George was told that he did. "Then she is, perhaps, destined to great fortunes," said he, as if he knew all about it.

"How very strange that Mr. Brooke should never have looked after her!" one of the sisters exclaimed.

“You may rest assured that Mr. Brooke has kept an eye upon her, though he may have made no sign. She stands next in succession to himself at Harden Tower. You see the house from the road between Hardenware and Stockleigh, high on the hills above a sea of wood—a dreary, isolated place. It must be a rarefied atmosphere up there. I should think that she would like this better.”

“M. M. knows nothing of rarefied atmospheres. Still, I fear that she may have to try Harden Tower. If it does not agree with her to live on the heights, she can descend to the valleys again,” said Elizabeth.

To hear that M. M. was perhaps destined to great fortunes, provoked a not unnatural curiosity to learn how that was ; but George Marriott seemed disinclined to speak further of this contingency. He was thinking how strange it was that he should have known her all this while—Captain Brooke’s

daughter, the young lady his father and mother sometimes talked of with concern, considering what effect it might have on her character and her happiness, when she was called out of obscurity to take her place as heiress of Harden. And thinking of her, George presently laughed; for as fables always gather about things interesting kept from the light, fables had gathered about her, which it would be the best sport in the world to tell her, if ever——

At this point Mr. Sheffield interrupted George's imaginings, by asking if Mr. Brooke was richer in land or in money.

"He is not rich in either at the present time," George said. "Much of his land is poor agriculturally, and it is not known to be a mine of mineral wealth. He makes something out of his wood—Harden oak and elm are first-rate in the timber trade. But if he live long enough he will be rich in money and town property through a deferred bequest."

“And if he does not live long enough?” Jane said, pondering.

No direct response was forthcoming, but after a brief pause and hesitation, George Marriott said that he should not be telling any secret if he told them the story of an eccentric will made by a certain Roger Brooke, in the third quarter of the last century: “Hardenware is beginning to talk about it again as the time approaches, when its final provision must take effect.”

“To think of dear little M. M. getting mixed up in an old-world romance like that!” Ann exclaimed, parenthetically.

“The story is this,” George said. “Roger Brooke married a handsome lass out of Hardenware, who being ill received by his family, prevailed with him to forsake his own people and his father’s house, and to adopt the ways and customs of hers. They lived a peaceful laborious life, died on the same day, and were buried together in Hardenware parish church, leaving in their joint names a

dole of money to the poor, which is still distributed by the vicar on Christmas Eve, upon the broad stone in the middle aisle which covers their bones. The vicar happens to be my brother-in-law. They died childless (concerning which there is a tradition mixed of fable), but what is true and undisputed is, that Roger Brooke left all else he was worth in trust to George Marriott of Stockleigh, John Bingham of Deane, and Richard Fynes of Markby, to accumulate for one hundred and twenty years, and then the whole to be paid over to the actual representative of his family, bearing the name and inhabiting the Tower. The actual representative is the Mr. Brooke you know of. The existing trustees are all gentlemen of the same name and place as the originals, and my father is one of them. Speaking for him, I may say that he will be glad to give an account of his stewardship, and to have done with it; for it has become a very complicated, difficult and quarrelsome business."

“And if Mr. Brooke should chance to die before the hundred and twenty years are out?” Jane suggested.

Mr. George Marriott passed her query over, and said: “It appears to have been old Roger’s intention to cut off his collaterals to the third and fourth generation; but his object will be defeated should Mr. Brooke live only eight months longer, for he is a survivor in the third generation.”

“And is he likely to live?” Jane perseveringly wanted to know.

“Likely enough. He is a wiry, energetic old man,” said George. “And let us hope he will live, or——” he stopped short, everybody looking at him, and waiting for the alternative. But he seemed to think that he had told enough.

“Or you don’t know what will come of it?” Ann said, completing his sentence.

“Just so—or I don’t know what may come of it,” George repeated, with an oracular nod.

They all understood therefrom that endless

involvements and botherations to the little cousin might come of it.

"We have not heard of Mr. Brooke yet, except that he is wiry and energetic. Is he wise? Is he kind? Is he popular? What he *is* matters more to M. M., than what he *has*, whether in possession or in prospect," Elizabeth said.

"I have never exchanged a word with Mr. Brooke, and have seldom been called upon to listen to his praises," George answered. "Harden Tower ranks with the great county houses. We Marriotts are a newer people. The handsome lass out of Hardenware whom Roger Brooke took to wife was a Marriott of the same stock as ourselves—common folk then."

"New or old, gentle or simple, we must all have had progenitors going back to the Ark—we must be very much mixed," Ann reflected, profoundly.

"Who will succeed Mr. Brooke at the Tower? Can he will it away?" Jane struck in.

"No, he cannot do that. It is entailed; it must go to his next heir——"

"To M. M.? And she has not been brought up for a great lady! What a shame that she should have been so neglected!"

"She may be thankful for the neglect—if you call it neglect," George said. "She has nothing to regret—unless it be that she took the place of some poorer friendless girl in the school where she had her education. And it is to be remembered that Mr. Brooke was and is a free agent. He might have married—he might marry even yet! There was a rumour that he meant it a year or two back."

"But is he not *very* old? To be a great-uncle sounds like ninety!"

"Mr. Brooke is not ninety—not eighty. He is seventy, perhaps."

"Why, papa is seventy! Seventy is not old. Seventy is only the threshold of old age."

Mr. Sheffield looked round upon his

daughters wearily, and George Marriott saw that he had stayed long enough ; and when he rose to take leave no one attempted to delay him.

The moment he was gone Mrs. Sheffield proposed that her husband should retire to his own silent quarters, and he went readily : looking back from the doorway as he quitted the beautiful pleasant room, and saying "Good-by" to it, which was like a melancholy presentiment ; for he lived only four days after, his malady developing at the last very rapidly, and the end coming, as death seems to come always, with a suddenness that startled and terrified the beholders, though they had been standing in its shadow for many months.

CHAPTER XII.

HARDEN TOWER AND STOCKLEIGH MANOR.

“These old fellows
Have their ingratitude in them hereditary :
They are not kind.”—SHAKESPEARE.

HARDEN TOWER. It stands square and strong after three centuries of storms ; its grey walls a landmark for all the country round. A dreary, isolated place to think of at a distance, perhaps, but not so dreary when it is familiar, and not so isolated but that any neighbour who wishes can get there easily, unless deep snow be on the ground. A red sunset makes the bold, outstanding windows blaze and burn, like a great fire above the murk of the November woods. Mr. George Marriott, riding home to Stockleigh on the road below, slackens his pace, and gazes up at the ancient Tower with a new interest.

Mr. Brooke, and his confidential adviser Mr. Parry, who are walking smartly to and fro along the west front of the house to warm their old bones after a long indoors business talk, halt as the ring of metal on metal chimes through the frosty stillness. It passes out of hearing, and the two gentlemen continue their exercise.

Says Mr. Brooke: "I am not tired of living. I would give all I have, and all I wait for, to be only five-and-twenty again—like that young fellow cantering home to Stockleigh! It is Marriott's son George, the eldest of half a dozen—an engineer, and practising his profession rather cleverly."

"I have no doubt you would! Who would not? To be anticipating a kingdom when you are going out of the world may well try a man's philosophy," Mr. Parry said easily.

"Not but that I may have many good years to live yet," Mr. Brooke rejoined, with a briskness that bespoke a strong vitality, and

he stepped out more firmly as if emphasizing his hopes.

George Marriott's description of Mr. Brooke as wiry and energetic was perfectly just. There was no sign of failure about him. His well-knit frame was supple and erect, his glance was clear and bright, his visage had the colouring of health and weather. A despotic man by his voice, yet not without the judicial sense that attempers despotism, and makes it in some places the best form of government.

Mr. Parry, of the same date and similar type, was Mr. Brooke's adviser and friend of forty years. There was no sign of failure about him any more than about his client. They enjoyed many differences of opinion, and the client was not readily guided by his counsellor, but the relation was always agreeable, and sometimes useful. Mr. Parry was down from London to-day on the affair of Mr. Brooke's great-niece. If Mr. Brooke had yielded to his judgment, that young lady

would long since have had the freedom of Harden Tower ; but Mr. Brooke had lived without the irksomeness of company until he wanted none, and any plea that served to maintain his solitude intact was good while it lasted. But though he had held back from initiating any communications with Mary Martha or her mother's friends, he had not refused to be kept informed of what affected her. Mr. Parry had professional relations with her school, and had watched her grow out of childhood into young ladyhood with the interest of a family lawyer who is both sagacious and kindly, and who sees her chances of an important future widening annually. It was true that Mr. Brooke had nothing to offer that seemed likely to make for the happiness of a young girl, and perhaps partly for that reason he had let her stay on at Thornhill when her schooling was done, though Mr. Parry preached that now was the time to advance his claims upon her.

On her side, Mary Martha had never

written that letter to her unknown kinsman which her Aunt Lena deprecated. The notion of seeking her own advantage suggested from Thornhill had put a full-stop to her fluent imaginations. Nor had Thornhill made any approaches to Harden Tower on her behalf. Mr. Sheffield had spoken of doing something on the Sunday evening after Mr. George Marriott's visit, but he was struck for death before anything could be decided upon. It was, however, the event of his death that put an end to demurs ; and it was all for the best that the opportunity of speaking the first word was given to Harden Tower.

Mr. Parry had taken Mr. Brooke unawares, arriving at Hardenware by the early train from London, and presenting himself at the Tower with the *Times* in his hand, which contained Mr. Sheffield's name in the obituary. Immediately Mr. Brooke fell into concern for himself, for his burden of years and his health, though from appearances he carried his

burden of years lightly, and had the finest health. Perhaps he was moved by the dead man's age, which was seventy, while his own age was seventy-three; but Mr. Parry interpreted his self-concern as a hint of distaste for the errand that he had come upon, which was guessed in a moment when he exhibited the advertisement.

And, indeed, Mr. Brooke had no fancy for facing his successor. To have a young lady domesticated in the house with him he exaggerated into a bore and an incubus. Yet this was what Mr. Parry wanted and advised. They set to discussing it. Mr. Brooke's disinclination was fertile in objections, but these had gradually to efface themselves before Mr. Parry's urging of a case of necessity. The lawyer had acquired ample information of Miss Brooke's circumstances and sentiments. He knew that when menaced with the wide world she had asked the direction and help of her former schoolmistress, Mrs. Sterling, which was

given in the form of a promise to find room for her as a junior teacher where she had been taught herself, if indeed her troubles came to that crisis. Mr. Parry determined that, of course, this must not be; her day at Harden Tower could not be very far off, and it was not fit that she should be thrust into a painful and dependent position meanwhile.

Mr. Brooke was proud, and sensitive in his pride; but as proud men will so long as the world goes round, he had stumbled into a few inconceivably mean actions, which yet he would not have endured to hear characterized as such. Mr. Parry was careful of his words, and while pleading the probability that Mr. Sheffield's death might leave Miss Brooke in a less enviable position than hitherto, he said nothing of the warning to go that had filled her with apprehensions, and the submission to which was perhaps only deferred by her timely invitation to St. Croix. The intelligence that she

was now in Normandy with Mrs. Devine, Mr. Brooke received coldly, very coldly—he did not like to hear of Mrs. Devine; but after much unanswerable argument he consented that Mr. Parry should write to his young relative, and prepare the way for her becoming, if not his yoke-fellow at Harden Tower, his pensioner with the status of his successor, where she would have the privileges and advantages of equal society.

The lawyer was returning to London by the evening train, and walked upon the terrace with his client, discoursing of other but not indifferent matters until the trap that brought him up from Hardenware came round to convey him back to the railway. From the lower road he had a distant view of Stockleigh, which was one of those old places where the house has grown as the family has risen, until it has become thoroughly incorporated with the local history, and is reckoned in the second or

third rank of county houses. It was autumnal twilight down in the garden there while the windows of Harden Tower still glowed to the west, and when George Marriott rode in at his father's gate nobody was about.

George's coming was not looked for, but was very welcome. Only his father and mother lived at home now; Dolly was married and gone; and to have George with them was their truest felicity. He should have come a month ago when the hunting began, but his work on the loop-line had kept him. He had not done with it yet, but had asked for a week of change, and Stockleigh was his first halting-place.

"I am off again to-morrow," he announced shortly; "I am going to St. Croix."

His mother said: "What to do there, George? To retrieve mistakes?" For George, who had sought parental leave and counsel before writing his love-letter to Mary Martha, had also confessed how

it was taken in silence, and had confessed again how it was returned to him, a dead-letter that had missed its mark.

He had now another story to tell—that his dear Mary Martha was not alone the niece of Mrs. Sheffield at Thornhill, but the great-niece of Mr. Brooke, their neighbour at Harden Tower—the daughter of his nephew, Captain Brooke, whose monument was on their church wall.

“Why, George, your romance is nothing else but a chapter of accidents!” cried his father when he heard this.

“Nothing else,” said George. “For a day and a night I was minded to scribble *finis* across it, but hope revived with a new morning. Mr. Sheffield is dead. He was buried yesterday—dear little Mary Martha’s best friend. She will be in sad trouble, and I have been thinking whether I might not comfort her, perhaps?”

“It is your last chance, George,” said his father. “You will have to speak now, or

for ever hold your peace. If you wait until her luck improves you will have rivals, and no advocate perhaps anywhere—certainly not in Mr. Brooke. If her preference is avowed before it will be another matter altogether. But you have one thing to consider—is it quite the right time to speak when she is upset with trouble?”

“Let George be judge! There is no touch truer than love,” pleaded his mother; “he will not speak if he ought not.”

George looked down for a minute, reflecting; then he looked up, and said quietly: “I’ll go to St. Croix, that can do me no harm.” His words were no measure of his feeling, which was eager, hopeful, strong with expectancy since he knew what he wanted.

This leaf of the story in progress was turned over, and Mr. Marriott gave his son a good deal of information about Harden Tower which he had never previously thought of seeking. It would have been

without interest for him. Now it was different. Whatever even remotely concerned Mr. Brooke might any day concern Mary Martha.

“Brooke is not an uncommon name, but still it is singular that it occurred to none of us to inquire into her connections when you intimated a wish that she might become one of us,” his father remarked.

“She was provided with a family and friends, and had a record complete as far as it went,” George answered. “Mr. Brooke ought to have seen to it that she did not grow up a stranger here—the blame is his, if there be any blame. When her father and mother were gone Mr. Sheffield took her up, and used her like a child of his own—she was his wife’s niece, and that was enough. That she had people on her father’s side he knew, but nothing more except that her father’s sister, the Mrs. Devine with whom she is staying at St. Croix, was much indebted to him—Mr.

Brooke would hardly like to hear how much—I believe that he was half the support of her and her children.”

“There is not a meaner man living than Brooke is,” Mr. Marriott said fiercely. He was a warm-tempered gentleman, and there was no love lost between Stockleigh and Harden Tower, as George knew. He could therefore, if he pleased, set down some part of his father’s bad opinion as ancient prejudice, and speak an extenuating word in Mr. Brooke’s favour.

“I daresay he has felt it terribly hard lines to be so poor, and yet within measurable distance of Roger Brooke’s huge pot of money,” he said.

“Brooke is *not* so absolutely poor, as he *makes* himself poor. That is his meanness—he cannot bear to spend; he won’t part with sixpence if he can help it! It will be a day devoutly to be blessed when Roger Brooke’s Trust expires! I should be sorry to leave you saddled with such an inheri-

tance. If the end were not near I should insist on being relieved from my share in it. Bingham and Fynes get on more easily with Brooke than I ever could. They are simply deaf and dumb to him. As for myself, having once tried to answer him with reasons, he is continually at me. Even Parry cannot convince him that none of the money which passes through our hands can stick to our fingers without his seeing it. Whatever you are, George, never be good-natured to people whose trustee you are! Keep a tight hand and a close mouth on their business as you value peace. I suppose that Brooke believes there are not in the whole county three such crafty, consummate rogues as Bingham, Fynes, and your father!"

Mr. Marriott had gathered fire and force as he went on, until he was very warm indeed. George replied in a pacificatory tone that it was impossible Mr. Brooke could believe anything so absurdly untrue.

Mrs. Marriott also put in a word to hush her good man ; she had listened to this sort of tirade often before, and shrank from the spectacle of his excitement, which was, indeed, rather alarming.

“Brooke is in too great a hurry to begin meddling with what is not his yet. And what will he do with it when he gets it, if he ever does?” the much-vexed trustee said appealingly: then answered himself—“He will do nothing with it; he has no appetite for real work, nor ever had: a man as indolent as he is mean. And after seventy it is too late to mend.”

“I would not say that, my dear,” interposed Mrs. Marriott, with mild remonstrance.

“It will be a world’s wonder if he does mend, but there’s room for it!”

George changed the subject by asking in what Roger Brooke’s Trust consisted.

“That is a large question, George; a very large and comprehensive question indeed,” said his father. “It consists in a good third

part of Hardenware, and more besides. When Roger Brooke was alive the parish church and his house were in the fields, and all the land lying south and west to the river, swarming now with a dense population, was his meadow land. The parish church is in the heart of the town to-day, and every house and factory on the Great Mead pays a ground-rent to the Trust."

"It is an awful district to look down into from the high-level railway!" George said emphatically. "Nothing short of a conflagration could purify it—and the steam engines might be up too soon to give even fire a chance."

"It is an awful district, horrible with grime and dirt, and the crowded old houses ruinous. But it is the fault of the Trust—not of the trustees, mind you. What we would do if our hands were untied you may see in the New Market. The fact is, George, such Trusts ought to be closed wherever they exist in our great towns. England will never

be happy and thriving again until we have a regular municipal system of weeding, thinning, and assorting local populations. With our colonies and means of communication and transport and transit, there ought never to be a congestion or a dearth of decent working people long anywhere. As for our drunkards and ne'er-do-wells, what I say is, let us have our Siberia !”

“There goes your father, George, trotting off on his hobby—politics, politics for ever !” said his mother, pleasantly. “Take a look at my roses in the bowl for a change ; you will not often see such roses in November, grown out of doors.”

The roses had a delicate fragrance, and if their beauty was a little pinched, the frost-tinged foliage, bronzed and crimsoned, matched it. When George had smelled the roses, he stood and gazed about him. The old-fashioned, long drawing-room was emptied of its young people, but it had always an air and perfume of their coming and going.

Neither of the daughters was very far off, and Mrs. Marriott delighted to keep the house fresh and gay with flowers that went by their names. A piece of music which Dolly had brought was on the desk of the piano, and her mother was playing it over when George arrived. It was the first time George had been at home with his father and mother alone, yet he missed nothing—even three at dinner were not poor company, being the friends they were.

George was understood to take a natural, vital interest in whatever was done or projected at Stockleigh; and so he did. In the morning, before proceeding on his expedition to France, he was taken for a tour of inspection all round the place. His father and mother had a minute acquaintance with every stick and stone upon it.

“It must be your own one day, George, if you live,” his father said, excusing some trivial remarks on scarcely noticeable improvements.

His mother claimed his attention for the hundredth time to a noble fir-tree planted on the day he was born. "It was a pretty thought in your father to plant me a famous tree to go by the name of each of my boys. Your Nordmanniana is grand, George. Look at it, what a height and breadth, what a mass of light and shade in its branches. We call it the glory of the New Garden."

The New Garden had existed fifty years. His grandfather had laid it out while yet the English yew and holly were grown for hedges. George was fully sensible of the charms of his old home, where generation had succeeded generation. It was a sunny morning, bright upon the front of the house—a whole chronicle was recorded in its picturesque jumble of additions and improvements, which a variegated tapestry of living and growing things strove to amalgamate.

Mrs. Marriott called her favourite roses after her girls. "Dear Amy's *Devoniensis* did splendidly this summer," she said, stopping

to admire its vast thorn-studded stems trained to the eaves. Then she made George mark the progress that Buxom's yellow Banksia was making on the foot of a bit of repaired wall, and how fast the white Banksia for Toddles was overtaking it—Buxom and Toddles being the grandchildren at the grey parsonage-house adjoining Hardenware parish church.

But George's time was up; the groom was at the door with his horse. "Good-by, father! Good-by, mother!" he cried, in haste to mount. They followed him to the gate. A little way down the road he looked back, and saw them standing still, hand in hand—the dear old couple, happy, lover-like—in the quiet autumn of their lives, and of the waning year. Would it be like this with him?

George Marriott had plenty to think of as he lost sight of home, and quickened his pace to a vigorous trot. Mostly his thoughts flew forward. What had he to care for with regret that was behind him? Nothing: he had a

good conscience, which gave him assurance in the sight of God and man. What had he to fear that lay before him? Time and chance happen to all men, and must to him, but a fair promise was his future so far as he could foresee. Harden Tower was shrouded in mist when he threw a glance up the hill, but the low road he was going was in the sun, and that kept him company until he passed almost unawares under the cloud that for ever canopies the busy, noisy town of Hardenware.

But it is not to Hardenware that we are going with him to day.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW VISTA.

“Look not mournfully into the past—it comes not back again ; wisely improve the present—it is thine ; go forth to meet the shadowy future without fear.”—LONGFELLOW.

JUST now events which affected the whole tenor of her future life came in rapid succession to Mary Martha Brooke. Her glee in Mr. Ockleston’s wise consolement and her Aunt Lena’s good luck was at its highest when there arrived a letter from Elizabeth Sheffield bringing intelligence of her father’s illness, followed three days after by the tidings of his death. Mary Martha loved her Uncle John dearly, and shed copious tears, which she had to staunch at intervals, to give ear to Aunt Lena’s plans.

“I am very, *very* sorry that it should have happened so, but you are a sweet, unselfish

child—you would not wish me to delay the arrangements that Mr. Ockleston has completed with so much pains,” that lady said, and opened her budget of affairs with natural reluctance at such a crisis.

Mary Martha dried her eyes, looked up, and listened attentively.

Mrs. Devine went on : “ Kate and Monsieur de Marcel will arrive in Paris next week, and are anxious that we should join them there. In Paris we can settle everything as easily and pleasantly as if we were in England. We shall spend a part of the winter in the Riviera. In February we may go to Rome, and stay there over Easter. To travel to Saxby in the depths of the cold weather would be too trying for my dear little Marguerite, and I could never consent to leave her behind.”

“ No,” said Mary Martha, and listened further for what of herself.

Mary Martha’s position was the awkwardness of the situation. She had been sent to

St. Croix for six months, of which two remained. The *pension* paid with her was ample, but the money had been spent, partly on Katherine's account; and it was now proposed and agreed between Kate and her mother that M. M. should pay a visit to Château-Marcel for those two months—if she would.

When M. M. understood what was intended for her, she said curtly: "I do not like the idea. Let me stay where I am, with Madame Tirard."

"But that is impossible, dear. Madame Tirard is good, and would take care of you; but she is not a lady, to be your companion. And, besides, she will require to let this apartment when I give it up."

M. M. whitened, and pleaded in a low voice: "Then leave it for a day or two, Aunt Lena. Give me a little time to think of it."

Her Aunt Lena acquiesced, but did not distress herself to devise any other way.

There was none—this of sending M. M. to Château-Marcel had been consented to only because there was none.

The house on the ramparts was never so gay and bright in the winter that Mary Martha need desire to stay there after the others were gone, but her feeling was that, for the present, she did desire it. She wanted to be still, and have patience awhile. That was in her disposition. She had no fear of any tremendous difficulties or perils to be encountered, but trouble had touched her, and she wanted quietness to recover her confidence.

To recite what troubled her: Uncle John was dead, and Elizabeth said not one word of her going back to them at Thornhill. Aunt Lena was in a hurry to be quit of her, that she might go to Paris, and be married to Mr. Ockleston. Besides these she had no claim of kinship or friendship that she was entitled to assert. There was Mrs. Holland, but she was very poor, and seemed to have forgotten

her. And there was her great-uncle Brooke, but in her aloneness she could as soon, or sooner, have embraced the hateful alternative of appealing to strangers: to do boldly venturesome things one needs the backing of happy circumstance.

Finally, there was her *contemporary*—had she never in all this while given a questioning thought to her contemporary, for whose sake, perhaps, she had been sent into exile. She had—and she had not—M. M. was reserved on this point, and even with herself. At her coming to St. Croix she would not have denied that she had thought of her contemporary as kindly and as often as of other playfellows and friends left behind at Saxby. But she had been happy and easily contented—not looking for signs or longing for messages, unless it might be a sign or a word through Mrs. Holland; and when neither word nor sign came she was disappointed, no doubt, but not beyond hope. It would be hard to say whether she was

dreaming of her contemporary or not, in these few dull days while her fate hung in the balance—while Mr. George Marriott was on his road to Normandy, and the post was running him a race with Mr. Parry's letter which should reach her first.

The letter reached her first. She was in the salon, wafting the feather-brush, when Madame Tirard brought it in. Always expecting more news from Thornhill, M. M. scarcely noticed that the envelope was not in mourning until she had opened it, and saw that the letter was dated, not from Saxby but from London, and was, by its preamble, a letter on business.

Her Uncle Brooke had been so much in her own mind that it caused her no astonishment to find a reciprocal interest awakening in his. The letter opened with a reference to her loss by the recent death of Mr. Sheffield. She was given to understand that Mr. Brooke had been satisfied to leave her in the hands of her mother's family until now,

because he had reason to believe that she was well cared for, and he had nothing to give a child in compensation for affectionate care ; but the time was come when an introduction to the head of her father's family must not be much longer deferred, and it was hoped that an invitation to Harden Tower, their ancient seat, would be acceptable to her and approved by her friends. This was the whole substance of the letter. The writer had evidently taken it for granted that the young lady he addressed would learn (or had learned) from Mrs. Devine what she ought to know more, and troubled her with neither information nor remark.

M. M. put the letter aside, and went on with her dusting. Meanwhile the wood-fire burnt briskly up. Then she set the breakfast-table, and made the coffee. By the time she was ready there was the noise of Marguerite and her mother approaching. M. M. saw that the reclining chair was rightly placed, and shook up the cushions

afresh. She had come quite to love her little French cousin's need of such tender assiduities, and Marguerite took them in a generous spirit. But when M. M. had to run out into the cold to refill the wood-basket, which Abigail sometimes forgot, then the invalid cried out upon her, not to make herself their servant. It happened so this morning. M. M. bade her never mind: "Think it is time of war!" said she gaily. Her Aunt Lena looked at her with fondness. There was truth in Marguerite's deprecating expression. M. M. did make herself their servant often; she had shown herself in all things here a loving and helpful soul.

It was not until the regular morning tasks were done that she introduced her letter from Mr. Parry. The three were then shut in together, prisoners of the wind and the rain, which had come on strongly since breakfast.

"Read that, Aunt Lena," M. M. began, and laid the letter in her lap; "then let us talk about it."

"I did not hear the post this morning," Mrs. Devine observed tranquilly, and took it up. To read it was the affair of a minute ; to digest it was a longer and harder matter. "I wish Katherine were here," was her first word, and she looked as if she wished it very earnestly indeed.

M. M. had not thought of Katherine. The letter did not seem immediately to concern Katherine.

Marguerite asked if she might see the letter, and proceeded forthwith to make out the scenes of her English cousin's future existence : "This comes in the very moment of time ! Kate will envy you awfully !"

"Don't speak of envy : it is like a blight !" said M. M. "What is there to envy me, in being separated from everything customary, and set down in a strange country, amongst entirely strange people ? Is Harden Tower very charming, Aunt Lena ?"

"Charming ? It remains in my mind as

one of the dreariest spots on the face of the earth! We hated to go there. It was like a dungeon, and fearfully cold lodgings even at midsummer. It feels all the winds that blow, standing so high."

"It is lucky that I prefer a bracing climate. And we see the first and the last of the sun on the hill-tops," M. M. said, making the best of her prospects.

"I do not recollect any sunshine there. The windows are so far from the floors that when I wanted to get a good look out I stood on a stool, or climbed up on the stone sill: there is an immense view all round. The last time I was at Harden Tower was on an afternoon in May, and wreaths of wasted, soiled snow still lay on the north side of the boundary wall."

"Oh, that is nothing! About Blackchester you may expect to see snow at any time between September and June."

"Then I hope there is abundance of wood," Margaret said, with personal anxiety.

"There is abundance of coal, which is better."

"There are both coal and wood in the Harden hills, but they cost money, and money was what Uncle Richard never could bear to part with," Mrs. Devine said. "Twice a year he invited us all to the Tower, but he did not make it worth young people's while to go for the long visits he expected. I never went there to stay after I arrived at years of discretion, and might take my choice of going or not going. Mamma gave it up before I did: she was too tender of discomforts not to suffer from the chill of stone stairs and uncarpeted rooms. Uncle Richard was so lean and hardy himself that he could not understand why we shivered. Papa liked the old place—men always do like the place where they have been boys. And when my brother was big enough to carry a gun, he did not mind roughing it for the sake of the shooting."

"I don't think I shall trouble about stone

stairs and no carpet—we had no carpets at school,” M. M. said valiantly. “I am healthy, quite healthy, and know how to keep so. A brisk walk always warms me up in the bitterest weather. I shall wear serge and seal-skin and double-soled boots——”

“You are not robust, dear, though you may not be in bondage to comforts,” her Aunt Lena replied. “For evening dress I recommend velvet and flannel; have a black velvet dress and a fine grey flannel—there are lovely grey twilled flannels—and wear one or the other always, varying your ribbons and ruffs and frills. Your Uncle Richard will love you the better for looking well. He hates the whole range of colds and catarrhs——”

“So do I—and red noses, their inevitable concomitant. I promise to take care of myself, Aunt Lena. Thanks to Shetland spinners, one may be wrapped in wool, and not lose one’s figure, and wear the prettiest shoes, yet be lifted inches off the cold floors.”

M. M. was in a flush of spirits for the

moment. Notwithstanding all her Aunt Lena said adverse to Mr. Brooke and Harden Tower, she admitted no prejudice into her mind. She reflected that there are always two points of view, and often several.

“Tell me more about that region, Aunt Lena. Give me some account of the people. When I go to a play I like to read it over beforehand, and to know the songs I shall hear at a concert. In the same way, I like to have the *carte du pays* of a new neighbourhood. Mr. Ockleston told me about St. Croix, and showed me his sketches before I came here.”

Mrs. Devine paused to consider : “What shall I tell you? It is so many years since I left the county that everything must be changed except the everlasting hills. I do not even know who lives in our dear old home at Stockleigh. Those were the days of pluralities, when I was a girl. Papa was vicar of Hardenware, but he did not reside ; he left a curate in charge, and we lived at

Stockleigh, of which he was also rector. Our house and garden were in a sheltered scoop of the hills facing to the south ; I have never seen such roses anywhere else as grew in our garden ; there is something in the soil and aspect of Stockleigh that favours roses quite remarkably. It was a lovely spot, and the church only a stone's-throw away. Mamma was very fond of it. Papa and mamma are both buried in the churchyard, and so is Uncle James, who died at our house. Indeed, all the generations of the Brookes of Harden lie there, or are commemorated on the church walls ; for the Tower is in Stockleigh parish. There is a brass to your father's memory in the chancel. Uncle Richard put it up at his own expense. You will find that he has a regard to his name."

"Quite right, I shall thank him for it," said M. M. concisely. Then she proceeded with her catechism : "If you lived at Stockleigh, Aunt Lena, you must have known the family of Marriotts who live there?"

"The clergyman knows everybody. I do not remember much of the Marriotts, except that they had a lot of little boys. I fancy there was a feud between us."

"They are the same people, Aunt Lena. The eldest of those little boys is an engineer engaged railway-making about Blackchester. He had a dear old aunt at Saxby, Mrs. Holland, and he used often to come over and spend the Sundays with her. He came to Thornhill to play tennis on Saturday afternoons. We knew him quite well! Did you ever see Mrs. Holland? She was a Miss Marriott of Stockleigh—it is rather fun to hear how proud she is of her family."

"You hear, mamma! The world is a very small place; did I not say that we should find somebody at Saxby who would know all about us?" cried Marguerite. "That is the comfort of belonging to people who have had grandfathers!"

"The world is one vast whispering gallery," Mrs. Devine said, and sighed

—possibly not appreciating with quite so much delight as Marguerite the fact that all about them might be known at Saxby before their appearance upon the scene. After her long troubles the poor lady was looking hopefully to a life of peace, and as much oblivion of them as could be obtained by a total change of society.

M. M. wanted to ask next what were her chances of other company if the feud with the Marriotts was still in force—who there was within a walk, within a drive. “There must be country-houses, and people living in them,” said she.

“There are country-houses, but who live in them now I cannot tell you. The vicinity of a town like Hardenware creates a monotony of change in a neighbourhood,” Mrs. Devine replied, perplexed yet willing to answer her. “Holden Manor, for instance, the house of the Umfravils, was let for three years to a Mr. Steelworth, who was mayor of Hardenware when he took it—a man in business there; and he

may have had half a dozen successors since. And Bewley, the fine old place where the Grimstones lived time out of mind, is all sold up since my day—family pictures, books, plate, porcelain, everything ; and the man who bought it was a Hardenware merchant again. Like the *parvenu* La Bruyère immortalizes, he set about improving it to suit himself, and spoilt it utterly. The Marriotts are of Hardenware derivation too.”

“A long while ago, I think?” M. M. said.

“Yes. They belong to the county now, but they are not of equal standing with ourselves. The Brookes, by their inter-marriages with the Umfravils, Constables, Grimstones and Longshanks, are connected with half the noble and gentle families in the kingdom——”

“The Brookes are as old and as high as the hills,” M. M. said, and laughed. “Perhaps their feud with the Marriotts began in a love-story, Aunt Lena?”

"Yes, it did. And thereby hangs the tale of the money that my Katherine proposes you should share with her."

M. M. clapped her hands. "Now, how oddly things come about!" cried she, then stopped with a rosy suffusion of the face. She was reminded of that little scene in Mrs. Holland's parlour when Mr. George Marriott let her hear how sweet a sound a wooing accent could give to her quaint name.

"You know one of the young Marriotts—*quite well*, I think you said? Are you imagining that another love-story might end the feud?" Aunt Lena asked, regarding her with amused scrutiny.

"I am not imagining anything," M. M. replied, clapping her cool hands to her hot cheeks—which contradicted her denial.

"There would be no harm if you were. Marry for love, and marry a good fellow, dear—that is my advice to you. To be distinguished, or titled, have no ambition."

"Aunt Lena, I will never marry without love—but why should I not have the luck of loving and marrying a good fellow who is on the road to honour, and even of giving him a lift with my money?"

"There is no reason why you should not, that I know of. Have you not told us you were born to a happy fortune?"

"Ambition is called hard names—'the moth of holiness,' 'the caustic of the soul'—but I think a man's life is likely to turn out 'a poor tale' if he does not start with some light discontents and noble aspirations—and *our* life too. There's Mrs. Carlyle; she says that she married for ambition, and was miserable. I take leave to doubt the misery—she would never have undone it. She spoke in a weary hour; she had pain, cruel pain to endure, but she had no remorse. For all I can see, she was in her element with Carlyle; he was cross-grained and self-absorbed—but what a perseverance, what a constancy! It was impossible she could think

little of him, for she was a woman as proud as she was long-suffering; and didn't she see all the lamps of glory blazing for him, and hear his wise sayings proclaimed on the housetops? That story of the writing, and burning, and re-writing, of the first volume of the French Revolution, is a match for the story of Sir Isaac Newton's papers, and his little dog Diamond upsetting the candle——”

“I am not sure that I understand you, dear? I trust that Providence will grant you a kind and comfortable husband. I don't care for Mr. Carlyle; and I pity his poor wife.”

“I wish she heard you! Surely God knew what he was doing when He gave her to Carlyle for a helpmeet? Does anybody believe that if she had married Irving she would have enjoyed the gift of tongues, and all that magic?—the summer lightning of fashion, and the darkness after?”

“Perhaps there would have been no gift of tongues——”

"Ah, now you are begging the question—let us return to our share in this present world. I will acknowledge Mr. Parry's letter to-day, and answer it in a week's time," M. M. said, taking it to read over.

"Why not answer it at once, dear? There is no difficulty—you have nothing to consider? All is arranged for you; you must go to Château-Marcel until after Christmas," Mrs. Devine said, a little urgently.

M. M. demurred. "You see, Aunt Lena, this letter was written on the occasion of Uncle John's death. I want time to write to Thornhill, and to have an answer; I should like to go back to Thornhill before going to Harden Tower. I do love them all—it will be an immense difference in every sort of way."

"I cannot deny it—they are a very generous, warm-hearted family; but Mr. Sheffield's death will leave less in their power. They were willing to provide you with a change—

and not the most desirable change—even before that event.”

“If they meant it, they had a compunction too, and it does not cancel their thousand benefits. No one is nearer to me.” M. M.’s eyes grew misty with the remembrance of her dear familiar friends, and of the beautiful cheerful home that was no longer hers.

Meanwhile Marguerite was maturing a plan of her own, and now cried from her couch: “Let us carry our English cousin away with us, mamma; let her see Paris and Rome:” and no doubt that alternative would have suited the little invalid admirably. But her mother shook her head, and M. M. said that was impossible—*impossible*.

Finally, she did as she had proposed; she acknowledged Mr. Parry’s letter, and promised to write again when she had communicated with Mrs. Sheffield.

CHAPTER XIV.

BETWEEN THE SHOWERS.

"Let me but bear your love, I'll bear your cares."

SHAKSPEARE.

AT noon the rain ceased, the clouds were driven before the wind, and a gleamy, wild sunshine burst forth, restoring the valley to beauty. Mary Martha stepped out upon the terrace to look abroad, and see what hope there was of its continuance. The chimneys of Château-Marcel and its red-roofed turrets were visible enough since the trees had shed their leaves. Mrs. Devine said it would keep fine for the rest of the day, and proposed a walk to the château—a daily walk for exercise and exhilaration being never neglected unless under stress of the worst weather. M. M. could raise no objection

to this, and they presently set forth, committing Marguerite to the good company of a favourite book, over which she was likely to fall a-dreaming, and perhaps asleep.

Mary Martha had not her mourning yet. She wore a Connemara cloak and a broad beaver hat with a streaming feather—a picturesque and beautiful winter costume, not in the fashion of St. Croix, but in a fashion which is never inappropriate. Mr. George Marriott, who was traversing the great square, saw her far in the distance, but did not know her. He was musing of a girl in black, and in *grief*, of which there was nothing suggested by the red cloak and fluttering plumes. And so she disappeared, marching apace towards the country, while he struck deeper into the town, and rang at the door of the house on the ramparts, only to hear that Miss Brooke was not at home, would not be at home for some hours, possibly not until towards evening.

The weather had been so violent in the morning that George had made sure in his

own mind of finding Mary Martha indoors, and of giving her a happy surprise; and he felt quite unwarrantably disconcerted. "How unfortunate!" he exclaimed.

Madame Tirard waited for his card, but either he forgot it, or did not wish to afford M. M. any moment of preparation. He asked with a certain abruptness in what direction Miss Brooke had walked. Madame Tirard told him that Mrs. Devine and the young lady had walked out to Château-Marcel. Instantly George was gone, and of the first passer-by inquired the road, while Madame Tirard proceeded to interest Marguerite in her account of the stranger.

The road to Château-Marcel was not long, and to George it seemed quite a little way; but he did not overtake the two ladies or catch any glimpse of them in the distance. The road lay along the brow overlooking the valley, and was very pretty in spring when the acacias were shaking loose their soft yellow leaves, and fragrantly shaded in

summer, the season of *fêtes*. Now all was bare, clear, well-swept ; for it was a favourite promenade, high and dry, and the prospect most charming. George could not miss it ; the château was in sight from the moment he emerged beyond the ramparts ; but soon he began to ask himself what was his object in this haste of pursuit ? He could not follow Mary Martha within those gates that he saw by-and-by before him, and to prowl about, lying in wait for her, might appear singular, and even impertinent, if he chanced to be observed. George, not more than other men, was given to imagining how things might appear ; but the circumstances were peculiar, and his courage declined and rallied, and declined again many times in the next hour or two. His initial disappointment at the house on the ramparts was responsible for this variableness.

Meanwhile Mrs. Devine and Mary Martha were at their destination, conversing with Madame de Marcel in her shabby comfortable

salon, the customary living-room of the family. On the hearth was a heap of white wood-ashes, the accumulation of several days, topped by glowing and smouldering logs which threw out a great heat and genial radiance. The stone chimney was open, the walls were wainscotted breast-high, and plastered and coloured above. A few antique mirrors and family portraits in tarnished mouldings adorned them, a few straight-backed chairs in black walnut stood up against them. There was a bureau of many drawers, and a huge table on stout pedestals encumbered with big books. The floor was uncovered except in front of the hearth, where stretched an Aubusson carpet far gone in wear. Over the doors were drawn heavy curtains of dark velvet, faded to tawny orange on the outer folds. Similar drapery hung at the window, which was sunk in a spacious recess, and looked into a court where was a corner turret enclosing a staircase. Mary Martha, whose position gave her the view of it, took note

how marred the walls were with age and weather, how the iron bars to the lower windows were rusted, twisted and broken away, and the glass entirely gone. The buildings on the further side of the court were in fact ruinous, and the habitable portions of the château not much better.

M. M. had been here but twice before : once on her arrival at St. Croix, in the days preceding Katherine's marriage, and again on an August evening, when a magnificent sunset and the profuse foliage irradiated and concealed the waste and decay outside. Indoors the uneven slope of the sunken floors, gaps and cracks in the dull wainscot, and patches of mildew on ceilings and upper walls, had impressed her with a sense of dreary discomfort and unwholesome damp ; but this November afternoon the liberal fire and drawn curtains gave to the old *salon* a warm enclosed aspect, cheerful and home-like enough. She thought it all in keeping, and that if she had to come here for a couple of

months she would not care so much : Mr. Parry's letter made all the difference in her feeling about this : only she would prefer to be with Madame de Marcel and Jeanne alone ; to be there when Monsieur de Marcel brought home his bride she did not wish.

M. M. took no part in the conversation between her Aunt Lena and Madame de Marcel, in which all their names, and Mr. Ockleston's name, and the minutiae of business, came up for discussion and settlement. Her mind was busy with notions more or less fanciful, with other things and people, and she heard without attending until the frequent repetition of "Harden Tower" and "Paris" called her to listen, and have a thought for her own interests. When she began to listen she found that these were being rapidly disposed of. Madame de Marcel was answering for herself and her daughter, that it would give them both the truest pleasure to entertain their young friend during a few weeks, until the time arrived for her removal to the

ancient seat of her father's family ; and proposing that she should profit by the opportunities of the château to acquire greater facility in French conversation. Jeanne, who was a most *spirituelle* and cultivated person, would also, if she were studiously inclined, have a delight in revealing to her the beauties of refined French literature.

Jeanne de Marcel entered as her mother was pronouncing her encomium—a strange figure in a blue serge overcoat and a fur cap tied down over the ears. Several beasts of the canine species followed her in, but were all invited to disappear on the instant, except a Scotch deerhound, who went over to the old carpet in front of the fire, and stretched his long length upon it, as if it lay there for his exclusive convenience and comfort. Perhaps it did. Whoever went short at Château-Marcel it was not the dumb creatures that the master loved.

In the explanation of affairs that the elder ladies felt it incumbent to give to Jeanne,

Mary Martha learned that her own were esteemed of chief importance, and she was given a view of them which had not before been presented to her. Madame de Marcel had heard from Katherine the story of Ralph Brooke's will, not with perfect accuracy, indeed, but with so much as made Mrs. Devine's communication of M. M.'s summons to Harden Tower the easier and more brief. The French ladies had been kind and courteous to Miss Brooke, as to a young stranger who had come to their friends at St. Croix for a little while, and would soon depart again; but this summons gave a reality to Katherine's story (which had sounded somewhat mythical) and to M. M. herself an additional consequence. Their change of tone was marked enough to amuse her without any blemish to their sincerity. They were gratified by Mrs. Devine's proposal to entrust her niece to them at Château-Marcel for the interval that it seemed desirable she should remain abroad.

“Mr. Brooke has not been so careful of her that she need hasten to rush into his arms at the first call,” her Aunt Lena said. “The dear child believes in everybody’s good—I hope that she may never learn that to want friends is to want a defence. We are very weak and open to affronts when we are alone, and appear to have no one to take our part. Ah, my dear, I *know* ! I have lived through it! Consent to stay here: your Uncle Richard will have more respect for you when he sees you possessed of the regard of other persons—his equals.”

Madame de Marcel said: “That was quite simple: all the world was influenced by adventitious circumstances in the beginning of acquaintance: and all but the finest intelligences were swayed by them to the end.”

“Let me advise that you defer replying to that letter on the part of the Uncle Richard until you can date from Château-Marcel,” Jeanne struck in with a little air of cunning, too palpable for a genuine conspirator.

“Yes, that will be clever, that will produce a good effect! My brother’s name is known to gentlemen in every country who are conversant with the new ideas. Charles is corresponding member of your scientific bodies. He reads regularly your learned publications. It has long been his ambition to take by the hand your admirable Buckland and abstruse Darwin; but circumstances have prevented a voyage to London. The Uncle Richard will say: ‘*Tenez*, she is acquainted with Monsieur de Marcel, that famous *savant*,’ and he will cause to be prepared for you a more noble reception—what you call *Welcome*.”

Mary Martha smiled: “You are very kind to offer to take me in and arm me to cope with Uncle Richard; but to begin with, I am not afraid of him,” said she. There was a strain of mother-wit in this soft-spoken reply. Wisdom of the world which comes by experience M. M. had to live and work for yet, but sagacity and sympathy, which are gifts of God, were born in her.

“Courageous gentleness is the only feminine armour,” Madame de Marcel said ; and Jeanne, regarding the young English girl with approval, predicted that the fierce and terrible Uncle Richard would be soon subdued—a prediction which Mrs. Devine met with a gesture of dissent.

The concluding word in M. M.’s affairs was for the present that she would come to Château-Marcel in the following week, on the last day before her Aunt Lena and Marguerite left for Paris. How long a time she might be required to stay there was remitted to future consideration, because it must depend mainly on the position of matters at Thornhill.

Out of doors the short November afternoon was glooming fast into darkness. George Marriott had found his vigil long and anxious, revolving the question over and over whether Mrs. Devine and Miss Brooke might not have taken another road home to St. Croix. But more than one wayfarer of whom he

made ingenious inquiry, assured him that there was no other road ; no short cut, no path through the woods, no path by the river-side ; the woods and the slope of the hill to the river were private property ; the only road to the town stretched straight before him, with already the lamps lighting up in the distance, and the windows on the ramparts beginning to shine.

He kept the townward side of the château, and could not therefore fail to intercept them returning ; but cool, clear, and steady of purpose as he was in every-day business, his heart gave a great leap and bound at the sudden moment when amidst the clamour of several voices, human and canine, he distinguished the clear girlish note of Mary Martha calling out good-by to the dogs, and promising them her company at Château-Marcel very soon again. There was the clang of a gate, then swift light feet approaching as he advanced, and the picturesque red cloak, which he had seen and let escape him in the

great square, appeared in view wrapped close about the figure of his dear little lady—who looked taller in the gloaming, and somehow less like a little lady whom he might please with a lively impromptu or an unceremonious surprise. However, she knew him, and her recognition was like herself, spontaneous, frank, and friendly.

“We were talking of you this morning—*only this morning*; but I never thought of seeing you! Aunt Lena, *this* is Mr. George Marriott,” said she, and gave him her hand.

Mrs. Devine’s greeting was attentive—as to a gentleman of whom her niece had said that they knew him *quite well* at Thornhill.

“I am taking a holiday. I have been at your house, and, was told that you had gone out to Château-Marcel,” George said.

“And you came to meet us! How kind!” M. M. cried pleasantly; then fell pensive for thinking of whence he had come.

They were now walking the same way, and at a smart pace, for the air was frosty and

cold. Neither could well see the other's face, but George felt without telling that these four months of her absence amongst strangers had not been without a growing and flowering effect on Mary Martha. She began to talk in her natural, easy way, asking many questions.

"You have come from home? You can tell me news of them all at Thornhill—I want to know so much—and about dear Mrs. Holland, who has never written to me."

"They are all at Thornhill, much as you might expect them to be, full of trouble and business. I went up there before leaving, and they charged me with many messages to you. They are giving up Thornhill, and that is a distress. I was to tell you that all the books and other precious lumber you left behind would be taken care of and packed up—Miss Sheffield said just that."

"But why are they giving up Thornhill? Where are they going? It is such a dear old house! Aunt Martha will be heart-

broken!" M. M. cried, with a touch of heart-break herself. This news was a shock to her; the whole future appeared to gloom with it.

"There are always changes when the head of a family drops," George replied. "There is not so much money, perhaps. Where they were going they did not say—but you will hear from them again very soon. They spoke of writing."

"Tell me more! How did Elizabeth seem? They write, but nobody dreams of putting into a letter the little intimate details one longs to hear."

"I was in the house only a few minutes on the last occasion. On the Sunday afternoon before Mr. Sheffield's death I went by request, but it was to talk of you, and your possible prospects at Harden Tower. Perhaps you know that Harden Tower and Stockleigh are not far apart?"

"Yes, Aunt Lena was telling me this morning. Stockleigh Parsonage was her

home, and my father's home, when they were young. She remembers you and your brothers when you were little boys—don't you, Aunt Lena?"

Mrs. Devine said that she did, and then, without requiring permission, she informed Mr. George Marriott that her niece was to go to Harden Tower about Christmas-time. ("I am asked on a visit, only on a visit," Mary Martha explained in a parenthesis.)

"It will end in her remaining. Mr. Brooke will assume the charge he ought to have assumed years ago," said her Aunt Lena, firmly.

"I am very glad that he did not!" cried M. M. "We may not suit one another; and if he does not like me, I shall not stay. Do you like him, Mr. Marriott?"

"I don't know him. But I am prepared to appreciate all his qualities and virtues, when the opportunity is given me," George said, cheerfully.

"What are his virtues?" M. M. asked,

but did not wait for an answer. She went on to speak of Mrs. Holland, and of her failure to write.

"But she *did* write. Letters were sent to you—more than one—of which you took not the slightest notice. You were thought to be very remiss," said George, and paused, listening how the rebuke would be taken.

It put M. M. on the defensive, as it was certain to do.

"*I!* Then I never had them! Aunt Lena, can you account for it? Every letter that I received was answered carefully—*carefully*. I hate letters myself that take no notice of what I say, and I make remarks on what I hear—*invariably*."

"You write a capital letter! My good old friend allowed me the pleasure of reading the two you sent her; and mentioned grievously that you might not have taken the trouble to read hers, which were perhaps prolix, in the epistolary style that ladies cultivated before the penny-post came up."

"Not read them! I should have read them ten times over if I had ever seen them! Nobody knows how I longed to hear from her."

"Of course," said Mrs. Devine; "Mrs. Holland misdirected her letters!"

"That was it—that was where the fault lay. And they have just lately been returned to her," George answered.

"And I have been calling her very ungrateful, and saying that it was the way of the world, though not like her—*not like her!* I will never blame anybody again until I *know!*" M. M. was quite penitent, which George enjoyed.

They were now at the town, passing through the murky old gate into a narrow street where the lamps were few, fed only with oil, slung across the roadway. None of the shops of St. Croix were brilliant, and in this quarter they were very dim, and buyers after nightfall rare. They encountered not a dozen people until they came

to their own door, when George began to take leave by saying that it was his intention to remain at St. Croix over Sunday. This was Thursday evening. There was a long moment's silence, then Mary Martha with a hesitating and perhaps shy hospitality said: "He will find Sunday a long day, Aunt Lena; shall we ask him to come and see us in the afternoon?"

George did not give Mrs. Devine time to speak lest she should make excuse, but returned eager thanks for this small mercy, and got himself away. It was a very small mercy when he came to consider it, and if he had waited he might have been asked in, there and then. Mrs. Devine was in doubt what to do when his own haste settled the matter. It was, however, enough to live on; and as much as he could expect—what right had he to expect any civilities at all? Perhaps he felt a trifle less buoyant than when he started on this adventure, and he thought a good deal of that unlucky

letter which should have prepared him a more joyous reception.

Mrs. Devine, reflecting upon what she heard and saw, made up her mind that these two young people had a natural affinity, and perhaps a conscious drawing towards each other, but no understanding that was confessed.

CHAPTER XV.

A SUNDAY VISITOR.

“This is a traveller, sir, knows men and
 Manners, and has ploughed up sea so far,
 Till both the poles have knocked ; has seen the sun
 Take coach, and can distinguish the colour
 Of his horses, and their kinds.”

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

“ I WISH mourning would go out of fashion ;
 I cannot endure it ! ” Marguerite exclaimed,
 as Mary Martha appeared in the *salon*,
 wearing her new crape and cashmere, put
 on for the first time that Sunday afternoon.

“ I don’t like it either, but one must wear
 it,” M. M. said in a subdued tone, and she
 sighed with a kind, sad recollection of Uncle
 John.

The influence of clothes is considerable, no
 one will deny it. Her mourning depressed

Mary Martha. She found a good book, sat down in a dusky corner, and wished that Mr. George Marriott were not coming to-day. She knew nothing of him in the serious vein, nor whether he had any serious vein. Her idea of him belonged to gay and cheerful times and places; he laughed, played, danced, sang songs, all more or less to the tune of "Begone, dull care!" The good book lay open on her lap, but was not read very diligently. M. M. made no sensible effort either way—to think or not to think of this young gentleman—but the thought of him came and stayed, presenting itself to her mind in a variety of guises, passing over it as phantasmagoria might pass over a mirror, distinctly reflected for the moment, but making no mark.

After all, when he came, she was glad to see him, and not surprised at her inconsistent humours. She was no longer aware of them, perhaps. Often till we speak we do not know what we shall say. He

seemed to bring a rush of fresh air into the little dark *salon*, where there was no sun this winter afternoon, and no flowers, but only the wood-fire, twinkling and sparkling to enliven and brighten it. George had recovered his buoyancy, his characteristic manly confidence. His countenance was aglow with exercise and health—frank, kindly, hopeful ; his step, his movement, his gestures, his voice were all life and vigour. Marguerite said afterwards that it had done her good only to see and hear that young Briton, and if England held many like him she should be pleased to be there. Mrs. Devine remarked with a meaning and significance, that surely the world must go well with such an one—born fortunate, by his gracious and noble aspect, as Mary Martha herself was born. That notion had occurred to M. M. before her Aunt Lena mentioned it. George always carried himself as if it were a secret animating principle of his. He trusted in God and his good

luck, and was without fear and without reproach.

George was making the best of his brief holiday, and without staying to be interrogated he began to tell the little company of ladies that he had been to Paris since Thursday evening, and what he had seen and done there. It was wonderful what he had accomplished in the time, but a railway engineer, he said, could sleep as well in an express train as in his bed, and that was how he had managed it.

“At that rate you will have twice as long a life as most of us—getting over the disagreeables of travel while you are in dream-land, and waking up to see sights a hundred miles from where you fell asleep,” M. M. said, congratulating him. The days were all too short, for her, and she disliked railway travelling. Her *beau-ideal* of journeying was by road and river, and on some former occasion George had heard of it.

“Ah, I know! You would prefer to emu-

late the 'Strange Adventures of a Phaeton.' Well, the world is coming round to your opinion. An American with a long purse is showing us even a better way—he carries his hotel with him, and eats, drinks and sleeps on the road. All in coaches are his kitchen, his parlour, his bedroom, and his establishment of servants. His horses are royal beasts. He sets out and halts at his own time. Train and tide are nothing to him."

"Eh, to be rich! That is what I would do!" cried Marguerite, sighing with vain desire.

M. M. had introduced her little cousin to that delightful tour of "Adventures in a Phaeton," since the dull cold days when she could lie out no more on the terrace; when they had nothing else to talk about they got the map, and planned where they would travel if they could. In this way they had visited a great number of places known to history and also to fiction. To see Old Kensington, and that sweet rural parish of

Berkshire where poor Mr. St. John was curate in charge for so many years, were amongst Marguerite's liveliest longings. It was agreed that Old Kensington was to be the terminus of their first actual excursion, though M. M. warned her little cousin that to her own personal knowledge much of it was gone—indeed, did not the book tell you that the shabby brick and mortar invasion was advancing along the green lanes and across the fields before Church House was burnt down? There was more hope of the country parish, that it would be as it was. At all events, the parsonage must be left, and the first Mrs. St. John's grave in the churchyard, and that lovely common where the girls roamed in such beautiful varieties of weather.

Marguerite broke into eager girlish chatter of these diversions, regardless of the fact that Mr. George Marriott was a stranger, and Mary Martha was not far behind her. It seemed that George was a gentleman with whom girls felt it easy to be themselves.

They invited him to devote his engineering talents to making out some cheap and agreeable mode of moving about for young ladies wanting to see the world. "Not people, we don't care for *people*, but places and things we wish to see. Particularly we wish to visit Edinbro'—and all Scotland, indeed."

"The time may come——"

"We have written down our Waverley tour on the back of the map, and marked the stopping places in red ink. If we might only go about as you do, with a stick and a knapsack——" this was M. M. of course.

"I never walk where I can ride," George interposed calmly; but this was misleading. George was good for his four miles an hour, at twenty miles the stretch.

"*Don't* you! Now, I like a beautiful walk in fine weather better than most things. Then I feel that I am young and strong—such a pleasure! In the fresh of the morning it is the greatest delight!"

"Give *me*," said the invalid, "one of those

little yellow wooden houses on wheels that basket-makers live in, with a grey mare to draw it, a bird-cage at the back-door, and a brave old Jacky, like Margaret Holt's factotum, to be our cook and coachman—to go a-gipsying all one summer through in the leafy lanes of England !”

Mrs. Devine appeared to listen with amused patience: “This is the way these children go on by the day together—imagine if I am not sometimes tired of it !” said she with half-rueful appeal to George. Then to them: “Instead of favouring Mr. Marriott with any more of your visionary journeyings, ask him to tell you true stories of where he has actually been.”

“Oh, yes, please do ! We shall be very glad ! Where have you been, Mr. Marriott ? *Everywhere*, I should think, at your rate of travelling,” says Mary Martha intelligently.

“Why, *no*, not *everywhere*. I have more than once sailed six months in a yacht. You touch and go in a yacht, and see so much that

it is possible to become quite tired of seeing," says George.

The girls cannot credit that. Marguerite shakes her head, and wishes she could try it—she would go to the Mediterranean.

"Shall I tell you how I went to the Mediterranean? It was my first trip five years ago, with Sir John Hardy."

This would be perfect, both the girls said: Mary Martha following up her words with the private reflection that George would be nearer their own age then, and would look at things from a more contemporary point of view, more *strictly* contemporary.

George began: "It was in the winter, which will surprise you, perhaps, but then we went sailing in quest of sunshine and genial weather; for Sir John was out of health, overdone with hard work. I was his pupil, and like a son to him; he had lost his own quite recently, the only one he had, and that helped to break him down."

"Poor fellow, I am sure it would—an only

son !” Mrs. Devine murmured, and foreseeing a long story, rang the bell for cups of coffee, to fortify them and enhance the treat.

After the coffee, Marguerite composed herself into the attitude of fixed attention, her hands folded under her cheek on the cushions, and her clear, soft eyes resting on the narrator. Will it be considered improbable if it is stated that Mary Martha, having also assumed the air of a listener, forgot by-and-by to listen ? She heard some familiar names at the outset : Genoa, Spezzia, Elba, and that the Isle of Arran had a likeness to Elba, but she missed most of what followed ; all the awful weather and abject misery sailing southwards to Naples ; all the fortnight the yacht was weather-bound in the beautiful Bay, where it thundered and lightened and stormed, and the cold was intense ; the customary visit to Pompeii and the ascent of Vesuvius. She came to herself for a few minutes on a glorious morning while they were coasting along by Sorrento and Capri, but was quite lost again amongst the

Ionian Islands. Later on she had a dreamy glimpse of Crete and cloud-capped Ida, but never woke up thoroughly until it was sunrise on Christmas Day in Egypt.

George was perfectly aware of these lapses in M. M.'s attention, and so was Aunt Lena. Her countenance was abstracted and almost sorrowful. They understood that she had enough to think of where she stood on the brink of change, and let her alone. And, truth to tell, George was not a dramatic reciter who could hold his audience spell-bound; he was exact in details, and abated none. Having begun his story, he would go on to the end. There was still the Suez Canal to navigate, and Ismailia to land at, blossoming like a garden at the edge of the Desert; there was to sail three hundred miles into the Red Sea, and to cast anchor in the Gulf of Akaba, where the coral formations are visible deep down through the clear depths of water. There was gathering shells upon the shore, beholding afar off the holy ground of Sinai,

and the mountain ranges of those mysterious lands : and here George grew more eloquent, for a flash of firelight on Mary Martha's face revealed that she was perhaps attending. He described Cairo as a city in masquerade, with its polyglot population, all riding more or less on asses and camels ; and then was off to the Pyramids, up the Nile, and back to rejoin the yacht at Alexandria. Then he was sailing home again—to Rhodes, to Smyrna, through the Isles of Greece, to Athens, to Corinth,—whether one might be tired with *seeing*, the girls could continue to doubt, but they had ascertained that it was possible to weary with *hearing*, and were not sorry when there came a decided check.

“I wonder whether you young people know what o'clock it is ? Abigail will say ‘*dîner*’ in a few minutes.” It was Mrs. Devine speaking out of the shadow. Dusk had stolen upon them unawares, and at that very minute Abigail did say “*dîner*.”

George sprang up to go, but this was not

to be permitted : he must dine, and then he might go if he wished it. But it seemed that he preferred remaining where he was, for he stayed till late in the evening, having dined well, and with all the honours of the house as represented by the comical dessert-dish and the worn old silver.

Mary Martha was living just now under a strain. Perhaps, if she could have talked a little with George by themselves the visit would have been lightened ; but Mrs. Devine was a talker herself, and found a host of questions to ask about the old families amongst the Harden hills. George did his best to answer her, though his own knowledge belonged to another generation. M. M. listened and wearied. The hereditary feud between their houses, and Mrs. Devine's private grievance against Mr. Brooke, eliminated from their discourse the only families that M. M. much cared to hear about.

"I am afraid," said George once, "these

details are not interesting to our young people;" for Marguerite was seen to suppress a yawn.

Of course the young people politely disclaimed the imputation, and begged him to go on. He went on just long enough not to seem sent away, but he did not linger, and Mrs. Devine ceased from her inquiries.

George had been happy and well pleased, though the day had not been all he could have desired. Still it had been a good day, as the days of man's life go. Mary Martha and he had learned a little more of each other, and that they were very human—weariable and wearying, even as common mortals are who care not one iota for each other! M. M. revived again the moment he moved to take his leave; and when he said that he expected to be sent to Spain railway-making in the spring (but if Miss Brooke was coming to Harden Tower about Christmas, they might meet several times again before his departure), she answered:

"I wish we may;" and now her tongue was cheerful, kind, and pleasant.

George could look at her revival as he chose—it would bear divers interpretations. It was not flattering that she should cheer up to see him go; but she was tired, *very* tired. And no wonder; Marguerite said they had talked enough for a week, and she hoped that Mr. Marriott was properly grateful for the entertainment that he had had; at which M. M. laughed, and said that she had no idea he was such an immense, clever talker. "But you encouraged him, Aunt Lena; *you* drew him out."

"He gave himself a great deal of trouble to amuse you—his travels were as good as a book," Mrs. Devine retorted.

She was not so convinced to-night that George Marriott had touch of Mary Martha's heart. She was cast into depths of perplexity by M. M.'s behaviour. What did it mean?—she could fall weary when

George was there, and laugh openly at his foible of universal knowledge.

But is it necessary that young love should wear horn spectacles? To be a little blind of loving purpose is one thing, to have defective insight is quite another. There was really a sympathy of tenderness sprung up between the two which neither had acknowledged before. George would have liked to take M. M. in his arms, and comfort her because of the changes in anticipation, that went and came like clouds on her sky; and M. M. knew that he felt this kind affection for her—by his look and voice, and her own trouble.

Mrs. Devine had taken George into her true motherly heart. She approved him so much that she would have been willing to arrange these two young lives on the plan of avoiding for them all the pains and penalties of hope deferred and capricious fortune. She had seen so much of grief that she was ever anxious for girls, and

how they might fix their lot. Dismal experience had made her timid. She said to herself that dear little Mary Martha might be spared a world of trials if she could be married out of hand to such a thoroughly well-conditioned and fine young fellow as George Marriott. And she said so to M. M., kissing her with a loving warm good-night. M. M.'s reply was not encouraging—but then in these cases we never know, we never can tell how far a girl is sincere.

“Aunt Lena, you have got marrying on the brain! *I* am not thinking of marrying: I have not done growing! And I shall want to be much, *much* fonder of anybody before I give up my liberty!”

That was all. But it was an evident satisfaction to her to see George in the morning on his road to the station—even in her working dress, and with the feather-brush in her hand. She pointed a moral with it. “Aunt Lena begins to quake for me because of the vexations of life that may

be fall when I get out of leading-strings ; so I am acquiring usefulness in case time of war should come, and all of us be brought down to helping ourselves."

George regarded her with joyful eyes. " Oh, there are many occasions short of time of war when we have need to be helpful ! In Spain now, but I must not go into that ; have you any word to carry to Saxby ? "

" Tell Mrs. Holland about the letters that missed, but not that I blamed her, only that I was sorry. And I will not forget her. "

With that George had to run, and only just saved his train.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT CHÂTEAU-MARCEL.

“Live here blitheful while ye may.”—HERRICK.

ON that Sunday week Mrs. Devine and Marguerite were in Paris, with Monsieur de Marcel and Katherine in their apartment near the Luxembourg, and Mr. Ockleston at his hotel in their close neighbourhood. Mr. George Marriott was returned to the scene of his labours near Blackchester without taking either Stockleigh or Saxby in his way back ; and his friends in both places, who had partly hoped to see him, reflected that it was unlikely any decisive step in his affairs could have been taken during his brief and hurried holiday.

Mary Martha was at Château-Marcel, and had received in the morning that letter from

Thornhill which was to instruct her how to answer Mr. Parry. Madame de Marcel and Jeanne had gone to church in a blustering rain-storm, and M. M. had the company of the dogs in the salon, where she sat within a triple-leaved folding screen, shielded from draughts, sharing the Aubusson carpet on the hearth with her canine friends. A splendid wood-fire kept the cold at bay, as well as fire can keep at bay winds that whistle at every chink of the rattling windows, and howl and beat at every door to get in.

M. M.'s letter was the joint production of Mrs. Sheffield and Elizabeth. At the first reading it made her throat ache; at the second, she felt that it was kind and only natural; at the third, she perceived that it was loving and simple, and what had hurt her at the first was even a necessity. She was not to go to Thornhill. The sale of Thornhill was being already negotiated with—with the *Weathercock*; and that caused

M. M. to smile and ponder a little. The house was being fast denuded of all they meant to keep and put in store; and as soon as they could be spared Jane was going on a long visit to one family of their friends, and Ann to another. Elizabeth and her mother had it in their minds to go abroad, or move about for a year, before deciding upon any new home. They did not think at present of remaining in their old neighbourhood; they would be much poorer than they had been, and they all thought that a total change might prove more comfortable than migration to a smaller house in the midst of people who knew them. There was some hope that the *Weathercock* would buy, in his bargain for the house, its fixtures and fittings also, and perhaps the chief part of the furniture, and if he did this their labours would be shortened; but just now they had quite enough to do, and were intensely relieved to find that Mary Martha was likely to be

taken in hand by her great-uncle Brooke. She was bidden to accede to his invitation with all the thankfulness she could muster; they did not suppose that she would be *glad* to go to Harden Tower, but they trusted she would make the best of it, as it was the only prospect open to her, and she was now of an age to regard higher considerations than mere wishes. When she was a child it was allowable in her to feel as a child, but now she must put away childish things, and take account of herself as born to a fortune which promised her abundance of work. She had always been credited with talents of a superior order, and now was coming the time to show them. With her clear and active mind, which certainly was not given her for nothing, she would be as happy, and probably much happier, in a position that exacted from her thoughtful application to real work than if her days were devoted to books, music and tennis—very good things

in their place—in the way of amusement, few things better, but not enough to keep a good conscience where duty called to more noble occupations. Her Uncle John had always been pleased with her industry, and one of the last words he spoke of her was that she knew what was right, and would not easily be turned aside from it. They all loved her—they must be cousins and friends for ever, let what would of prosperity or adversity befall any of them. They must correspond regularly—nothing like regularity for keeping up a lively interest in absence. She must let them know what the time and arrangements were for her going to Harden Tower ; if Thornhill was disposed of before Christmas, they would proceed to London, and they might have a few happy days together there on her way ; but the final settlement must be left until nearer the date. If they were ready to leave England before she was ready to leave Château-Marcel they might even come to St. Croix, and

have their meeting there. She might rely upon Elizabeth that she would positively not fail her.

The morning passed quickly, with the rain driving at the glass and the hurly-burly of the storm rioting round the château. Mary Martha would have gone to church with the others, but Madame de Marcel did not encourage it, and after her letter she read the Service aloud, as they did at the old house on the ramparts—first four of them, then three, and now herself alone. After that she got up and walked about. There was a long stone gallery not bad for the purpose, if the person taking exercise was dressed as for out of doors. M. M. liked this sort of deck-pacing when she had anything to think out, and here she thought out her letter to Mr. Parry, and in the afternoon she wrote it.

That gentleman had been impressed by the brief and courteous directness of her previous communication, and Mr. Brooke, to

whom he forwarded it, remarked to himself that the young lady knew the rules of polite behaviour. Her second letter was equally direct, but it was fuller and told all that was necessary, perhaps even a little more than was necessary. Mr. Brooke was not unacquainted with the name and reputation of Monsieur de Marcel, and there was just a flavour of chagrin in the feeling of surprise with which he learnt that the elder daughter of Captain Devine and his offending niece was a few months married to that famous *savant*. M. M. had been requested not to speak of her Aunt Lena further than to say that she had gone to meet her daughter in Paris, and that meanwhile an invitation to Château-Marcel had been accepted for herself until after Christmas. She made very sweet and grateful mention of Thornhill in allusion to the break-up of that happy home—"the dear home to which she had been brought from India fifteen years ago, a weakly, little three-years-old girl,

orphaned of father and mother, so fragile that it was doubtful if she would be reared ; but, thanks to the care and kindness of her good friends, she had grown up healthy and strong, and thanks also to them and to the School for Officers' Daughters, she had received the education of a gentle lady."

At this point Mr. Brooke observed with chill approval that his great-niece had none of the detestable vice of false humility, and ought even to possess some considerable beauty and dignity to bear out her manner of writing ; to which Mr. Parry answered that she did. Her promise of beauty was rising when he saw her last, which was in the course of a dancing lesson, figuring in the stately minuet—a tall, slender girl with a clear outline of face, lustrous eyes, and rich brown hair, tied back in a bunch with a red ribbon.

The letter ended by saying that M. M. was happy to be invited to Harden Tower at this time of general dispersion amongst

her friends, and that she would be glad to pay her visit at the beginning of the next year. Mr. Parry inferred from the whole tone of it, that she had been left free to write as she pleased, and that she was actually wanting a home, and making it at the present moment with strangers and new connections. Mr. Brooke understood as much too, and carried the letter away with him into the country. He chanced to be in town when it was received, and read it at his lawyer's office. Not to keep M. M. in suspense, he instructed Mr. Parry to give it a reply at once, and to fix the first week in January for her coming; and also to tell her that she would hear soon from himself. The lawyer was gratified. "The young lady's visit is not going to be so unwelcome an event, after all," said he; and in following his instructions he contrived without violating the truth to make Mary Martha feel that Mr. Brooke would be the better for her company, and that nothing but good

was to be anticipated from their coming together.

This was the kindest way of putting it, for since it was no longer a mere play of her imagination M. M. could scarcely fail to have misgivings as to the success of her introduction to Harden Tower, which seemed rather of duty and necessity on both sides than of choice. However, it was now a thing decided; she was to go there and would go far more willingly, whatever it might be for roughness and dulness, than to any house of people who did not belong to her. The sense of kinship confirmed her courage. She was not a bond-slave to be detained against her will, or of servile spirit to linger if she found herself uncared for, in an atmosphere too rarefied for breathing and living at ease. She let her Aunt Lena know the result of the correspondence, and sent Mr. Parry's letter to Thornhill with a long ditty from herself; and then, while expecting Mr. Brooke's promised communi-

cation, gave her mind to the business and pleasure of the passing day as it was at Château-Marcel.

The life there was sufficient, and simply delightful while it lasted. Madame de Marcel was goodness personified, and Jeanne was excellent company, whether for the five-mile walks, which were her daily exhilarating practice in fair weather, or over the best of Molière's plays, which she revealed conscientiously to M. M., illustrating them with voice and action. M. M. too had her parts, which she declaimed sometimes in the gallery alone, but more often to the dogs in the *salon*, who opened sleepy eyes and winked at her, or raised noisy points of objection if she added the emphasis of menacing gesture, defying them as unreasonable parents, or scorning them as ridiculous suitors. The ironic tone is offensive to dogs of merit, and all the dogs deserved well of the family in their several ways. There were other live creatures in and out of the house that Jeanne

had to tend and write gossipy letters about to her brother : there was Fanchon, his little pet monkey, and the parroquets—monsters of mischief and noise. The animals were an occupation of the family. M. M. took it up, and was rewarded and diverted by their innocent tricks and oddities. Sometimes she wondered what Kate would make of it : and thought that it would do her good to grow in love with it, for there was not much else to do at the château—not much visiting, or other lively ways of enjoying leisure.

It was a fortunate circumstance that Mary Martha was one of those souls who are happy thinking. She did not want to be for ever doing, going, talking. The facts of her life would bear a good deal of weaving about with fancy work, and she did not repress her fancy. It may be supposed that George Marriott was a favourite figure in her aërial tapestry, and possibly it was so. Diogenes, a gruff old dog who was not familiar with carpets, but abode always out of doors in the

ruins across the court, was her confidant here and might have told. M. M. and Diogenes were chief friends. There were still sunny mornings when it was most pleasant sitting out of doors, and the court was the sunniest spot of any. M. M. often brought out her sketching tools, and made studies of the stone staircase and the vine upon the walls; and when she was settled and quiet at her work Diogenes would creep out of his lair, and stretch himself not far off, watching her. He had a bad name for moroseness; old age and contempt had spoilt his temper, but there was sagacity and a vast experience in his blurred visage. Nobody took him for walks except his master, and his master had been long away. He had never condescended to run with Jeanne's troupe; but one morning, when M. M. had drawn for an hour, she proposed a walk to him—a short walk by themselves on the road to St. Croix. No doubt the old dog felt that she would be considerate to his infirmities, as his master was; and after

some reflection he got up, and slowly followed her.

M. M. mentioned to him that they were going to meet the postman. She had spoken to him before of a letter that she had *rather* expected, and which had not come, and she told him, going out of the gate, that if it did not come to-day she should give it up. "Three whole weeks will have gone since he left St. Croix," she said—referring, of course, to George Marriott.

Mrs. Devine had talked of Mr. George Marriott at the château, and had told Madame de Marcel what she could have wished for her dear niece. The French ladies believed that the affair might have been judiciously arranged in the French manner, but Mrs. Devine had not felt herself of sufficient authority to meddle in it beyond her whispered word to Mary Martha. It was that word, the first plain word on any such matter which had put ideas into M. M's. head. Jeanne de Marcel, who had a mind not above curiosity,

observed her rather narrowly, and soon discovered that she was looking for a letter from some other quarter than Harden Tower or Thornhill. It must be, then, from Mr. Marriott. And so it was. M. M. had begun by saying to herself: "Aunt Lena talks nonsense, but will he write, I wonder?" and she was almost sure that he would. After certain days it was: "I think I *must* hear from him, if it be only a line to tell me that he has seen Mrs. Holland." Next: "I did hope that I should have a letter, but it does not seem like it." Then: "If it does not come to-day I shall give it up."

It was a very beautiful morning: the sky blue, the sparse leaves hanging to the trees gold upon it, and the sunshine bright and sweet as September. Mary Martha and Diogenes took their own pace and walked at leisure until they saw the postman swiftly advancing towards them. He looked through the letters in his hand as he came along, and closed the sheaf up again with an action that

M. M. quite understood: "He has nothing for us," said she; "I see that he has nothing for us;" and she did not even inquire, but let him pass. Presently Diogenes proposed returning, and they returned at the same gentle pace as they had gone. Jeanne was about the lodge, and the manner in which she met M. M. seemed to say: "Disappointed again?" But the mystery of it was that M. M. had no air or sense of disappointment, none whatever. She had more the air of having arrived at a positive conviction and conclusion which released her from the trifling and troubling of vain expectancy. She did not linger about the gate, but convoyed Diogenes to his lair, and refilled his water-dish. "No letter, you see, Diogenes, not one little line! Aunt Lena was totally mistaken: he does not care for me—not *really*. And if he does not care for me, what care I how far he be?" she said, with a bold paraphrasing of the old song, Diogenes drank, sighed heavily, and lay down to doze and dream again. Mary Martha

went indoors, and resumed her study of "Les Précieuses Ridicules."

Madame de Marcel took kind motherly notice of her young charge for a day or two, but perceived no symptoms of a nature to disquiet her. M. M. bore her usual countenance of sweet gravity when nothing particular was doing or saying, and lightened up also as usual when anything of interest occurred. She was a good deal occupied with her own thoughts; her mind abhorred a vacuum; and when she was done with study, company, and the diversion of exercise out of doors, why should she not *think* if she liked it?

It was December before Mr. Brooke wrote, but when he did write he chose a happy moment. His letter was not long, but it was as nice a letter for the occasion as it could be, and cleared Mary Martha's imagination of the fears that beset it. "We shall be friends," said she. And in that tone she answered it.

The very next day there was a letter from Saxby. That was from Mrs. Holland, and full of mingled news. George had been over to bid her good-by before going home to Stockleigh for the rest of the winter. He had given a pleasant account of his visit to St. Croix, and had confirmed their approval of Mr. Ockleston's second choice in marriage. Kitty Clewer had lost her mother, and was leaving the Green. Dr. and Mrs. Bloxham were well. Poor John Crocker was laid to rest under the great elder-bush in the church-yard; and Thornhill was an uninhabited house, which made that end of the village seem quite desolate. There were, however, confident hopes that a lady at the Red House would keep up the sociability of the place, and that Mary Martha herself would be seen there some day again. The writer mentioned that her previous communications had come back to her from the dead-letter office, and that, being quite out of date, she had put them into the fire. George, she said, was

sorry they had missed, but it was her own fault ; she had confounded two addresses, and had given him the wrong one also.

There was a little haziness here : “ Given him the wrong one also—but he said nothing of having written ? ” M. M. mused.

No letter can explain everything—but this letter she was glad of. It seemed to re-knit a dropped link with her best and earliest attachments, and to bring her nearer home again.

END OF VOL. I.

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